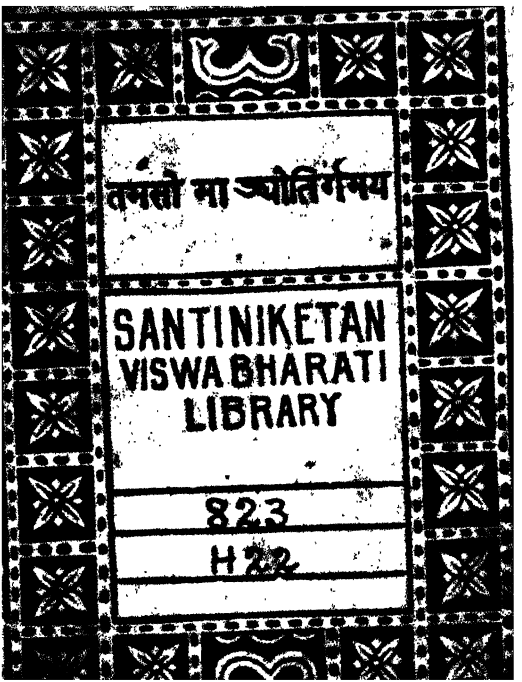

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A ROMANCE OF MODERN LIFE

CLIFFORD GRAY

A ROMANCE OF MODERN LIFE

BY

WILLIAM M. HARDINGE

LONDON
SMITH, ELDER, & CO., 15 WATERLOO PLACE
1881

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TO

THE YEAR

1876–1877

'Post jucundam juventutem

. . . . . .

Nos habebit humus'

(*Student's Song*)

'Lean over me—lean over, dear, awhile,
One while ere yet mine eyelids swoon to death;
For one live moment give me of your breath
And one last shaft of sunlight in your smile!
Stoop down and kiss me once, and reconcile
My 'soul' to hear the word this instant saith;
For the spent heart within me travaileth,
Sense being so faint and this world's worth so vile

Speak not at all: but fold your hands in mine,
Dim not with tears my stars that are your eyes;
Lean low and listen . . . closer, closer bend!
It is not I that speak—a voice divine
Whispers through mine its heavenlier harmonies—
"Lo! I am with you always, to the end."'

PARIS,
18—

(*From a MS.*)

CLIFFORD GRAY.

'Upper Norwood, Surrey:
November 26, 18—.

'MY DEAR FRANK,—I want to see you. Do you recollect at old Baxter's what confidence we used to promise each other before you went up to Christchurch or I set out for Florence? That seems a hundred years ago; but I hark back to the confidence, and want to draw upon it now—there's a mixture of metaphors which proves me not yet either sporting or commercial! I am here high and dry, being unable to go abroad this winter. I lost my health in Italy and my heart in Switzerland. I find one can do without one or the other, but not without both; and, as far as making pictures goes, it's better to have both. Which means that I have left off making pictures for the present, or I am reduced to making pictures in the fire;

the ultimate home perhaps of all my sketches. Will you like to come and see them before they go there, and me before I go—I don't know where? No fire could be hotter than that I have passed through; but that's metaphor again. Invalids often talk in metaphors—usually vague ones. I believe it's a good sign, like fractiousness. So you must be glad if you find me fractious too.

'Yours ever,

'CLIFFORD GRAY.'

This note of Clifford's gives as much outline of his artist years as I could have given when I received it. We had been at a tutor's together nearly seven years before, and had formed a friendship which did not require to be kept up by correspondence. Our aims in life were different, our tastes unlike; and friendship has to do with neither aims nor tastes. I liked Clifford and he liked me; but there is no need for two friends to write and tell each other that, and I had literally not received word or sign from him since he had left England to study painting in French schools and Italian galleries. The death of his mother, who had been a widow for many years, had brought

him back, and I had heard that his health was indifferent; a line of condolence that I had sent him some two months past, and which neither needed nor received an answer, had sufficed to show him where I was, and I received his letter with interest, though without anxiety.

It was only upon reading it a second time that it occurred to me he had passed through some sorrow more individual than the common artist lot of toil and disappointment, and the bereavement of which I knew; and I determined to go down to Norwood on the following day, a Friday, and remain there to hear the Saturday concert at the Crystal Palace, when I could return with friends whom I was certain to meet there, after hearing a programme of some special interest.

Friday was one of those mild, unseasonable days that a calm November often brings, and I felt the keener Norwood air bracing as I walked up the hill from the Low-level station. Among the houses on my left lay the one in which Clifford Gray was lodging—a pseudo-Gothic gabled little house shut away in a garden, which had attracted him by being at once remote and accessible, and affording him a sufficiently large room and good light for a

studio. Some chrysanthema were in flower before the door, and the last leaves of the creepers over it had not yet fallen. It was still early in the day, and the sunbeams, with their weak autumn glow, were defining the place, staring full on the windows and accentuating them in the midst of a stillness that was almost solemn. To me coming so recently from the London streets, and but just out of a railway carriage, conscious too that I was close to a great place of amusement, the little retreat seemed charmed. It looked like the home of a man who is spell-bound, content to dream away his days while he waits for the promise of his life, which is not to be fulfilled—and in truth it was so.

As I was announced, and entered a long low room beneath the one he used for his painting and where he spent his hours of enforced idleness, Clifford rose from a sort of couch that stretched between the fireplace and an old-fashioned window, and as he rose set down a portfolio that had been occupying him, between the couch and the wall. The action was furtive and the look on his face disturbed, as of a man who had been abstracting himself, and who returned to his surroundings with a shock.

I was surprised at the change in his appearance: it was not so much that he looked ill—he looked indeed less ill than I had expected—but that he had lost entirely the sanguine, buoyant expression which had characterised him. Doubtless we were both changed—the seven years that succeed nineteen are years of change incomparably more than the succeeding ones—but I could not help feeling that there was an alteration in him which was due neither to mere lapse of time nor to ill health, as I sat down near him and we looked at each other with a smile.

He was very handsome, with the sort of foreign look which without any affectation of dress or fashion is apt to come upon an Englishman who has lived much abroad; and he had acquired an un-English ease too in receiving one—the ease of a cosmopolitan who makes no fuss over such a trifle as a seven years' absence—which was pleasant enough. He was carelessly and yet becomingly dressed, although he had not left the house yet, and his listless languor would probably keep him in all day.

'I ought to have met you, Frank,' he said; 'why didn't you say when you were coming?'

'It's such a journey—isn't it—and such an out-of-the-way-place?' I answered, laughing; and the years since we last had speech of each other rolled away like one day.

But he was not at first communicative about his adventures, although he talked a great deal in a desultory fashion about his lodgings, his landlady, the Crystal Palace, and some mutual friends. I gathered, however, that he had seen almost nobody since his arrival in England, and for this he gave first one excuse then another—his mourning, the details incidental to his mother's death, and so forth—which all resolved themselves into disinclination as the real reason of his keeping aloof.

I told him what I could find of interest in my usual days—something of Oxford, something of London, something of law. It is astonishing how dull a dilettante-barrister's life sounds to an artist; more astonishing how dull it sounds to the barrister himself when he talks about it to an artist. All the while I told it him I felt that his attention was desultory, that his own vague days had held something of more significance than anything I could tell him.

Some luncheon was served us, but Clifford scarcely ate. The more I watched him the more I observed his restlessness; one would have said he was expecting news or a visitor. He would push his plate from before him and lean his elbows on the table while I talked, looking at me with feigned attentiveness, and all the while with an eager questioning in his eyes that was like speech. I felt I was under criticism; if I could have put his regard into words it would have meant, 'You look something the same, you talk much the same: I don't listen to what you say, but I hear nothing in it that I cannot account for. *Are you to be trusted the same?*'

Presently I said to him rather abruptly: 'And your illness?'

'My illness,' he answered after a pause, as one surprised into speech, 'is the same, Frank, as ever it was. You know we went to old Baxter's for quite different reasons; you because you played too much at school, and I because I worked too much, and my mother found that I wasn't strong enough for Winchester. I felt I had lungs. She knew what that meant: she had felt it herself until by-and-by she found she had only one. I was

sent to a tutor's for pure air and regular work and plentiful diet,—bread, butter, and plumcake at discretion, as they put up at refreshment-stalls anent the "shilling tea." No! I don't mean that, but for whatever old Baxter's advertisement promised, and I got it. I got more; I got to understand beautiful things in a limited way, and to love them in an unlimited way; the interior of a cathedral (which sent you to sleep), the slope of a hill (which you only wanted to climb), were the things that fed what I believe is called my artist soul, that decided my vocation. They made me well and they made me their prophet in my humble degree; and I had my bent and went to Italy and worked, and I've done fairly well. You have seen quite the worst of my work on the walls of exhibitions. I had some failures and some illness, and I went to Switzerland, last spring, to be stayed up from the laziness that southern summers brought on me. I went to Switzerland——'

He paused and looked at me again, and a mist like tears gathered over his eyes—brown eyes, very wistful and tender.

'And painted mountains and saw marvels,' I added.

'And painted mountains,' he repeated slowly after me, 'and saw *marvels*.'

We had finished luncheon; he rose and rang the bell for some coffee. It was a long low room which had been two: the folding doors had been removed, and a curtain separated the front and back divisions that once perhaps were drawing-room and dining-room. We had lunched in the back part, and now came forward again to the front, which faced south-west, and where the winter sun shone brightlier.

As Clifford half drew the curtain between the rooms I watched him; a tall young man, powerfully built and nearly six feet high, but with this strange air of lassitude upon him; it was as if his will were paralysed. He stood a moment with the curtain in his hand before he joined me in the sunny window; then he threw himself upon his couch again, and lay with raised eyebrows looking out at the little suburban garden.

'And saw marvels,' he said; his hand straying to the big portfolio that lay between his couch and the wall.

'Well,' I asked him, 'you must show me the pictures.'

'The pictures are upstairs,' he answered. 'I have much to finish, but I have not set brush to canvas since I came here. I am ill, Frank; I cannot work.'

I rose and walked to the fire, resisting as unmanly the impulse that I had to press his hand, so powerfully did his words appeal to me. 'You should have rested yourself in Switzerland,' I said.

'I did rest myself,' he answered; 'I took nothing with me but my portmanteau and a sketch-book; I got well. When I shut my eyes I can see again the verdure and the snow, the lake and mountain-torrent that cured me. I got quite well, and then——'

His whole aspect changed again, he shrank into himself upon the sofa, and a dogged sullen look clouded his sensitive face—'and then I fell——'

'In love?' I asked him.

'I fell *ill*, I was going to say,' he answered; 'in love, into a dream, anything you will; you shall hear it all by-and-by perhaps, I don't know; it ended in my breaking a bloodvessel like a man in a book, and now I suppose my health is really gone; I feel disinclined, out of gear; nothing seems stand-

fast, my old landmarks are lost. Is it a phase of feeling? is it finding the truth? I want to know. I come back to England, my home landmarks are gone too. I write to you. . . . are you——?'

He hesitated: I for my part hesitated no longer, but sat down by him and took his hand in mine; it was dry and hot.

'We'll do all the talking this evening,' I said; 'meanwhile I want to see that sketch-book of yours before it gets dark.'

'Don't you want to hear the music in the Crystal Palace?' he said, as if evading my request; 'the band plays at four, and it's near four now.'

'Will you come?' I asked him.

'If you like.'

And we put on our great-coats to go out.

As we lit our cigarettes at the writing-table, I saw a small book of artist's memoranda lying half open there, a sketch-book for the pocket, with a pencil in it. I took it up; for an instant he made as if he would prevent me, and then shrugging his shoulders as I was about to lay it down, he added: 'Take it with you; you'd better look at the jottings there than at the faces in the concert-room.'

'What's in it?' I asked.

'Oh! gargoyles, bits out of chapel windows, Alpine flowers, insects—nothing and everything.'

I put the book into the pocket of my coat, and we set out together, arm-in-arm.

CHAPTER II.

WE went into the Crystal Palace: there are worse places where to spend a November day; the union of quiet and activity there, of unfrequented courts and moving crowds, always invites thought and talk. I found out at once what, else than the pure air of Norwood, had made my friend choose this spot for his temporary home; it appeased his restlessness to watch the people wandering up and down, and he had been sufficiently long out of England to run but a slight chance of being bored by meeting his acquaintance, while there was enough distraction to his brooding thought in what might be going on in the transept or the theatre, from an opera to a potato-show.

We walked once up and down in silence, refreshing our eyes with the tall palms and greenery and listening to the hum of voices, and then we crossed into the glazed-off hall where the band

had begun to play. It was a mixed selection of music; they commenced a spirited march as we took our seats, and I heard it with some attention, as it was new to me, and scored in an ingenious and surprising style; so that I left the sketch-book unopened. The piece following it was a medley of favourite airs from Faust, and I loosened my great-coat, thus reminding myself of the book in my breast-pocket.

I drew it out and opened it at random to occupy my eyes while my ears were half-engaged with the music. I chanced, not, as I had expected, upon a memorandum of Swiss scenery, torrent, or lake, or hill, but upon some curiously realistic notes of a continental hotel; the corner of the stairway, the entrance-portico placarded with advertisements, a bit of a breakfast-table with flowers and letters, the study of the pattern of a piece of lace. I cannot describe the impression it made upon me, opening up these trivial things while listening to the tender searching music; it was like looking through the desk of a person who is dead, with the vague memory of his life in your mind. The drawing of the stairway corner impressed me most; I returned to it again and again,

though there was not a single object in the sketch that was beautiful. It was a bit of an upstairs staircase in an hotel—nothing more; the balusters, the walls, the matting, into which some cypher was wrought, were all of the commonest and least interesting order; but the light was cleverly managed, —light as if cast from a lamp or candle that someone was carrying down, falling in a white circle upon the carpeting and stone.

I was roused from looking at it by Clifford's hand turning back the leaf; he was paler, with a drawn look of vexation on his face, and he said: 'The only studies there, at all worth seeing, are the first.'

I shut the book at once, and, duly opening it at the beginning, proceeded to look it through; it was filled with most felicitous design and happy reminiscence; clusters of gentian and sprigs of edelweiss alternated with the lovely shapes of cloud and boulder, and the forms of ripple and falling water. Without being an artist I perceived at once that the talent these notes exhibited was of a very high order—a trifle morbid perhaps in its seeking for what was unusual and strange, but healthy in its dexterity and carefulness of rendering.

Presently, and at their very best, these notes abruptly ceased; some pages had been torn out, and then followed the memoranda of the hotel which had arrested my attention.

Beyond this again all evinced impatience and half-forgotten skill: pages had been scribbled over and blurred; others were filled with mere scratches of pencil or strokes of brush, up and down, up and down, as if the artist had set himself to paint, but found his cunning gone. I was shutting the book sadly as the band began to play the sublime strain of Margaret's last prayer, when I perceived a face drawn upon the inside of the cover, the surprise of which thrills my pulses still.

It was a face hastily sketched, drawn rather against the will than with deliberation, and in so few strokes, by such a sleight of hand was it conjured on to the paper, that one would have said the artist's pencil had for a long while traced no lineaments but these. There was no hesitation, no feeling the way in outlines; they were just set down with their peculiar grace and character as precisely and unerringly as a mathematician would set down a geometrical figure.

It was the face of a woman, neither girlish nor

middle-aged; young and rather sad, the contour oval but irregular, the curve of the delicate lips and the line of the eyebrows—square not arched—differing widely and giving an expression of wonderful mobility to the features; the cheek was rather thin, the nostril proud and fine, the hair brought low on the forehead, and of itself growing low; the nose and upper lip rather long than short, and increasing a certain plaintiveness of look.

So far describable in words, but the eyes indescribable.

The upper eyelashes were drawn in a fine arch. I have never seen so beautiful an eyelid as they implied; the under line, which was square and curved up to meet them at the corners, utterly contradicted them; the iris—it might be grey or brown, I could not tell—was clear, the pupils rather contracted as with looking at the light, and a peculiar character was added to the eyes by heavy shadows under them, which gave a stagey, artificial appearance, again in absolute contradiction to the infinite candour of the iris. The light was full upon them, as if shed from a lamp held before the face, perhaps in the hand, and so cast upwards, which made the dark lines the more theatrical and odd.

These are mere words, and quite inadequate to express the eyes that met mine; their peculiar combination made them alike almost the eyes of a Virgin, almost of a temptress—Mary or Magdalen, novice or actress, no one could have said; it was just a question of chance or aspect. At this moment, with the band striving at Margaret's soaring melody, the expression of the eyes might have been that of a freed soul; ten minutes later when they were playing, by way of contrast with Gounod's music, Berlioz's 'Damnation de Faust,' they were in as excellent accord with the chromatic writhing of devils.

I sat and stared at the pictured face as one that studies a riddle, trying if the symbolic letters will burn their meaning into his brain. So great had been the draughtsman's mastery that I could fancy the eyes suffused with tears; and mine, when I raised them at length from the page and looked straight before me at Mr. Manns' energetic back, were dim.

At last I turned to Clifford, trying to shut out the vision of the face, which I had regarded so attentively that by just abstracting my gaze I could see the features before me, upon space, like a floating ghost. He had given way to his dejection

utterly, and was sitting quite still, his face inclined my way and his eyes also riveted upon the page. The 'Damnation de Faust' fortunately clashed on and precluded the need of speech.

I shut the book, and for me, if not for him, the spell was temporarily broken; and I had time to curse my stupid indiscretion and recover my self-control before the music ceased. I was casting about in my mind what outside topic to touch upon, when to my amazement my companion, anticipating my speech, roused himself, with a shake as it were, at the final chords, and began immediately to talk with feverish haste.

'One always sees the same people here,' he said, forcing a laugh; 'they amuse me. Look at those two girls by the pillar; they come twice a day, and bring some grim and finger-stained embroidery; they hold their work in their hands and the music plays; they are neither industrious nor musical, their faces tell you that; they neither accomplish a stitch nor hear a note. But no new monstrosity of a woman's dress, no new Satyr under a man's hat, escapes them. They take the measure of fashion and passion. They have gauged me long ago. I am too pre-occupied for them, and they would have

ceased to observe me if it were not that I observe them. They know that too, and it flatters and distresses them. Do but watch them; they are perhaps parson's daughters who are sent in together, each as the other's safeguard, to gain elevation of mind from hearing really good music. I know the cant of it. They are silent as the grave about what they see; I do not even fancy they have confidences in each other; they never speak except when they are embarrassed by looks. There is one of them has caught that fellow's eye to her right, three rows in front of her. She turns and speaks to her friend. What does she say? Neither of them knows, neither cares; it is a *ruse*, a gesture. Oh! I know they mean nothing by it; it will end in nothing. But they learn; they know who approves them and who loathes them; they gain glimpses into God knows what slime and folly. It is like dram-drinking; they could not exist without it. They imbibe life, or death if you will, at twelve o'clock and at four, before they go home to their luncheon at two, and their tea at five, in the family nest. The mother of one of them comes here sometimes in a Bath chair; her daughter sits by her and holds her hand—the mother looks at her and smiles. The

mother is a fool. The daughter only holds her hand because she knows that Tom or Harry is observing her. The mother is less than a fool, she is an idiot. Why does she not hark back to the days of her youth? She did the same then, unless the world is really getting worse. And those girls will be mothers of families by-and-by and befooled themselves—it is compensation—and their lives right themselves. Meanwhile what grows? The evil heart of the world.'

He was talking impatiently, and his cynicism was painful to listen to. I looked at the two girls he spoke of; they were quietly dressed and busy with their needles, and I think they heard the music, though they were not enthusiasts. Clifford was distraught; his mind was out of its balance; he had chanced upon the bitter core of one of life's fairest fruits perhaps; he could believe in nothing but the worm and rottenness beneath their rind.

'And how hollow it all is!' he went on; 'they are perhaps least culpable, vile as they are. They are curious and observant; they have a real motive in their looks, although it is a bad one. But look at that man, sucking the top of his stick over there and looking back at them—no, not even looking at

them, but conscious that they are looking at him! He has no curiosity, he has no enterprise:—just this, if he were not looked at he would pine and die; and these are the people I like to watch. When I was an artist and strong, I would have looked at that little girl's eager face who is following the music from a printed score—at that young German student to whom it is as his own hillside air at home. Now I am a wreck I sicken at them; I study those two misses and that man. I know I see true; my sharpened sense is like a scalping knife, it lays it all bare, but it only seeks disease and death.'

I was much pained: was this man Clifford Gray?

'And,' he went on, 'it is not only crime that attracts me, for which I have (as the vulgar saying is) an eye; it is triviality. Look at that old woman; she occupies my attention; I shall dream of her, although she is repulsive to me What is she thinking of? Nothing. What is she hearing? Nothing. Her mind and senses are asleep; the music just ticklesher ears and lulls her to a stupid coma. She is horrible; she has indigestion, heart-burn, what you will. That hair bracelet round her wrist is filthy; it interests me, I should like to know its history—a history that is common as the ground.

It is the hair of some aunt that she hated, and who hated her. She legacy-hunted that aunt to death; I know she did. She wears her hair round her arm like a fetter; she wears it because it has a gold clasp with a turquoise in—not gold, silver gilt: it *is* a fetter; it will drag her down to hell. Shall I make you a picture of her? I could *not*. I see her soul so clearly I could not draw her body. I should draw you something between a year-old cabbage and a slug. That is because I see the truth; I am awake! Oh, Frank! my art is gone from me, because I have seen the truth: I lose courage.'

He was speaking in a low whisper, and, after a pause, the band had begun to play a waltz; it launched into the noisier music now, and he ceased speaking as with relief. He had begun to talk that I might not ask questions, and had been unconsciously exhibiting more of his real state than he would have needed to do had he answered any questions I should have asked him. I determined gradually to ask none, to let the confidence he should give me just have its way. Meanwhile I listened to the waltz, possessed ever by the visionary eyes I had shut up in the sketch-book. I could fancy them showing over some one's shoulder in the

dance, and anon looking up into his eyes with their fallen-angel glance.

There was no music to which that look would come amiss; there was no beauty that might not have been heightened by those eyes. Mobility, adaptiveness, that was the characteristic of the face. Was it the face of a great actress? I wondered.

Clifford had ceased to listen, and, as the rest of the selection was familiar to me, I proposed that we should leave our seats. We returned to the transept, and I began to talk to him about one thing and another, to prevent his dreading questions from me and over-exciting himself by such feverish speeches as he had uttered.

'You talked,' I said to him, 'as if you were becoming a French realist—don't they call it?—as if you had taken a course of Zola.'

'I read one book of Zola's,' he answered me; 'I read it because I thought it might show me the real nature of this rottenness of things that is so plain to me; but I was quite disappointed. Certain things are traced, of course, to hereditary instincts and so forth; but one learns nothing from the creed that a person is vile because his great-grand-

mother was vile. I want to go farther and deeper. I want to sound the individual, not to connect the race, and realism helped me not a whit. I had noticed what Zola had noticed; I notice it with every glance, and my only wonder is that a man should take the trouble to describe so minutely what is so obvious.'

'And so nasty,' I added.

'I should have said that too a year ago,' he said; 'but I begin to doubt everything so much that I cannot tell what is nice or nasty, as you call it, any longer. I begin to think that refinement is what is nastiest. There is *no* real refinement. One shudders at tripe and onions and speaks languidly of *foie gras* and truffles. The one dish is natural and strengthening, I believe; the other is certainly diseased and unwholesome. It is refined because it is expensive to buy disease, and because it has a French name.'

'I like *foie gras* and truffles,' I said meditatively.

'So do I,' said Clifford, laughing a little; 'but I don't know that I shouldn't like tripe too if I was told that it was good to eat and had to pay half-a-guinea for it in a china jar; and I know you wouldn't like goose-livers, if they were said to

be unfit for food, and given to beggars because the birds had been diseased. And it's the same with people as with things. I don't complain that it is so; it's no use to complain. I want to know *why it is so*, and *why I like it to be so*.'

'That's a different question,' I said; '*do* you like it to be so?'

'I believe I do,' he answered me. 'I want to know, Frank, is it because I am out of health that I am bored by people's ideals and amused by their monsters?'

We had turned into one of the side sculpture galleries as we walked.

'Look here,' he added; 'here were three stages of interest. I used to come here when I was a child, and think these plaster casts were the most beautiful things in the world. That Dying Gladiator, that Antinous—it is Mercury, they say, but I didn't know that then, and was just as happy without knowing it—that Venus, I worshipped them. I felt they were only symbols even of the real statues, but I saw the artistic truth in them. I used to come here and spend days with them; I knew them all like schoolfellows; they made me stronger, they made me hate ugliness and sin, they made me

an artist,—that was my first stage of interest. My second was in finding the real statues;' he paused and passed his hand over his eyes.—'Oh Frank, I shan't forget finding that Mercury—the one they call Antinous here! I had spent some days in the Vatican, working consistently from the very first marble images, and not hurrying through at once to the famous hall with the four cabinets, and still —still—my recollection of this Crystal Palace statue was not shut out. I wondered where I should find him—in what group; whether he was really the Vatican Antinous. At last one day, just as the tiresome restrictions for closing the place were going to turn me away, I came to that hall, and determined to anticipate my feast. I ran round; the Laocoon—I held my breath: it was like lifting up the veil of the inner temple—the Apollo—it was like finding the god—and then, Mercury . . . my friend Antinous, his very self; the link between god and man, a sculptor's Christ, "the strength of my cup and my portion for ever."

'Well,' he went on after a pause, 'that was the second stage; the first was seeking, the second was finding; conceive the third?'

'Sorrow?'

'Sorrow of course; who ever sought and found that did not ultimately grieve?—but worse than sorrow, disgust. *I have no care for these things now*; my soul sickens at statues. When I think of them they seem to be set in a white light far above me, out of my reach now; and I am come back to the plaster casts you see—but with what a difference! They have no interest for me, no meaning; I see in them poor copies of forms that I have beheld as in a dream which cannot be reproduced; but I do not care. I care just to see how they are set up here, what are misnamed, what cad has scribbled his initials upon them. I care to look into these galleries that might be (ah! and that were) instinct for me with such suggestions; merely to laugh at the open mouths of cockney girl and boy that stand here staring; to catch the vacuous comments of the boor and the silly giggle of his wife.'

'It is not that you have ceased to love them, but that you love them better—that you are jealous of them.'

'I would I could think so! But no; it is that I am awake. I have learned my lesson. What I

thought were for the world's delight, the leaves of the tree that was for the healing of the nations (I told you Frank that I was ill enough for metaphor), are, as the event proves, only fit for the scoff of the rabble and the grin of the loafer. It is the loafer and the rabble that are alive, not they; and somehow, as I tell you, I find my interest in these.'

'It is wrong, Clifford; it is first because you are ill, and then because you are idle.'

'Nonsense; I am idle because I found out I was only painting dreams. I have lost my illusions.'

'How?' The question slipped from me at unawares. He set his teeth.

'Do you think it will do any good to tell you?' he said presently.

'It may do good, and it cannot do harm; I shall not blame you, Clifford.'

'I believe you,' he said; 'and, indeed, it was for this I sent for you. What I have to tell is partially written. I have half confided it to paper, and I, used to keep a diary, but it looks back at me and I cannot write it. I sent for you to tell it you, but I have had a hundred minds about it this afternoon.

I stand upon the verge of the end, and it seems as if I should scarce get through the recital, and yet as if I could not leave it untold. You shall read me what I have written, and I will help it out and fill it in as best I may. I want you to know, Frank, what has destroyed me. When my lips have been once, for all, unsealed about it I believe that I shall know rest, for my story is all of myself that I retain; it is all that I have left to give away. Let me get rid of it; you at any rate will have shared my burthen, will have entered into my knowledge, and I think you will not suffer.'

He was exhausted and pale. I took his arm again.

'It gets late,' I said, 'and chill; let us go.'

As we turned into the transept again, dark now but for the dazzling row of gas jets that were being partially lit overhead, we passed a small group of people, foreigners I fancied from their eager gesture and loud speech. It was too dusky for me to distinguish their faces, or to perceive more than that they were two or three men and that a couple of ladies were with them, one of whom was tall. As we passed them arm-in-arm, the taller lady had her back turned to us, and appeared to be listening

to what her companion was saying. I was the nearer to her, and, as her laces stirred with her movement, I detected a most subtle and delicate perfume near me; it was something between the smell of scented daphne and sandal wood, less luscious than the flower's and less dry than the wood's. An instant afterwards I felt Clifford's hand tremble violently on my arm.

'What is it?' I asked him. He stopped a moment, but we had turned the corner by the shrubs and were in the transept now.

'Nothing,' he said, recovering himself and looking round; and he did not speak again till we were back in the garden of his little Gothic lodging, waiting like a vapour-bath of quiet to receive us.

CHAPTER III.

CLIFFORD was overtired with even such slight exertion; he had not seemed to feel fatigue, and indeed it was difficult to tell exactly how he was ill; he did not cough, he was not in pain, but during the last ten minutes he had run down rapidly into a state of feverish exhaustion. It was as if his strength were suddenly gone out of him; but he did not complain, and, looking at him, I began to see that such quick relapses must be of usual occurrence. He took off his great-coat and stretched himself at once upon his couch, looking out of the still unsheltered window at the last streaks of colour in the sky. His silence might have seemed affected, were it not for his utter want of self-consciousness; he had totally forgotten the strangeness of my presence with him. This lassitude had evidently become his life; he had not any further interest or occupation.

I took up first one book upon the table and then another, but was watching him the while, although I kept up desultory talk which required from him only an occasional 'yes' or 'no.' Presently, when he seemed a bit rested, I asked him to let me see his upstairs studio.

'Oh, to-morrow!' he replied; 'there will be more time then. I want to tell you my disease without delay; you can see its landmarks by-and-by. Will you do as I ask you?'

'Exactly.'

'Very well; I am going to get you out my diary of last spring; you can read my handwriting, I know. Read it aloud to me; if it doesn't interest you, it will interest me.'

'But is it a healthy interest for you?'

'No! it is death to me, but your reading it will alter nothing; I live only in those days.'

He was bent upon it, and I made no further objection. He raised himself and, kneeling up on the couch, took a small key from his watch-chain, and opened a cabinet that stood upon a narrow table against the wall. It was a quaint old piece of Italian workmanship, ebony inlaid with ivory in curious figures, and with old-fashioned silver fasten-

ings. There were drawers inside it, and an open space, in the centre of which was a small ivory figure of Silence. From one of the drawers he took a journal bound in black morocco, such as might have formed part of the fittings of a despatch box. He shut the cabinet and threw himself back upon the couch with the journal, turning the leaves over and over.

'Begin here,' he said at last; 'my wound is only six months old. It should not take long to heal, should it?'

I took the book from him and read:

. . . . . .

'*May* 27. My week at Axenstein is over. Never was anyone more set up than I. And the sketches! I have sketched so much, that I have neglected writing here, and at last, in two or three bits, I have pleased my severest critic,—self. The hotel capital; its gardens, rather Shanklin-Chinish, tea-gardeny; its neighbourhood, like Hamlet, "mid-way between earth and heaven,"—enough to make one love earth and long for heaven. People a minus quantity, an invalid or two, and three ladies travelling together, probably because it is cheaper now than in August. They are all of fervid tem-

perament: one of them is like a black-and-tan terrier, and one is like an angry gnat, and the third is like a red-hot coal for sunburn—like a red-hot coal too in this, that you have no sooner got hold of her than you cry out to be allowed to let her drop. They don't love each other much; I suppose they hang together because that may be cheaper too. It's very praiseworthy of them, really, for they can't like it—men don't do those things. Think of the hourly crucifixion of travelling with A. and B., because they haven't got any more spare cash than I have!

It is good to be alone here. I have missed nobody, wanted nobody Once or twice, when I've really pleased myself with the pines, I've wished that somebody could see my work, and oftener wished that everybody could see the sunsets; but this missing somebody, if it be missing somebody, has only added a relish to my enjoyment. I can't believe up here that I was ever ailing. I can run up and down hill, sit out for hours at a time, and eat in a manner quite unfair to my *pension*. Now I am off to fresh scenes. Can they be of such enchantment as this? One last look at it from the parapet overhanging the steep,

against which I have planted my table and chair to rewrite myself a traveller. In this early morning glow, the hotel on the opposite height looks like a fairy palace. I wonder how it got there. I believe it's hideous, really. It has a dome and a general Coliseum-country-house effect which is not fortunate; but I have got to love it. And below—below—the banks climb down and down to the water; the white road swirls and twines along like a dusty snake, and reaches at last the whiter streak of shore that lies along the unutterable blue. Is it blue or green? I don't know. It's Luzern-waters-by-Brunnen; that's the colour—a special one and beautiful past words, though it sounds like the name of a racehorse. I shall be upon that water in a couple of hours' time in a hot steamer. I redouble my gulps of this higher air when I think of it, and look up instead of down. Look up and see snow—snow—snow. Once, in London, during a very hard frost, I remember hearing someone (who had travelled too) saying that the snow along the Park glades 'reminded him of Switzerland.' I thought Switzerland must be very beautiful! Switzerland *is* very beautiful, but it is not at all like the snow in the Park glades. This snow that I am looking at now is not

like a pall, or a veil, or a girl's forehead, or a dove's breast; it is like nothing in the world but Alpine snow in the morning light of May.'

Clifford interrupted me: 'Spare me the snow,' he said. 'Go on where that description ends; suffice it that I could enjoy things then, though even to hear of my enjoyment of them wearies me now.'

I went on some lines down.

. . . . . .

'*On board the steamer.* How hideous people are! The water is beautiful, but it has lost its hues; for compensation, my heights are lovelier than when I looked at them from opposite or above—lovelier perhaps because of my losing them. Do I do well in leaving this place? A question, by the way, that I never remember to have asked myself before. I suppose I am right to go, although I feel I could live and die here. But I want features for my pictures, and Axenstein is rather an idler's than an artist's platform of the land. I want, too, to paint bits of towns—I love towns—specially one of those covered bridges at Luzern; arcades overhanging the water and painted. One I think is painted with the Dance of Death. I have a curiosity about those bridges; I shall like to look

down upon the water from them, and hear the peasants tramp across, and listen to the laughter of the women washing clothes in the lake. Women? That recalls me to my surroundings; they are chiefly women. My three eager travelling companions are here, but only on a trip; they return to our beautiful pines to-morrow or next day, after having leaped like the fleet-foot kid at sunrise and sunsetting upon the Righi. They laugh at me because I eschew the Righi; perhaps I shall come there yet. But not while they are there! I am so happy that I do not want to do anything other than I am doing. I fall to thinking of my mother and my friends in England, as if they were folk in quite another firmament; it is as much as I can do to steer myself to an hotel. I set my course towards the *National* because it is so near the water, and because I hear vague tidings about the costumes being occasionally worn there still. I wonder who else on this Brunnen steamer is bound for the *National*. I peruse the features under the hats and bonnets near me; there is nothing but what my soul loatheth. I am very heart-whole, certainly; I do not think I was ever in love at all. What is this—a collision? No! but a pause, that

we may see some pretty aquatic sports as we near Luzern. They suggest the familiar pole-climbing for the leg of mutton, but here the non-successful fall into the sea. There is plank-walking and other feats that amuse me, I don't know why! One always likes to see one's fellow-mortals made ridiculous when one is well; that is a sober fact.

Luzern at last, and a landing-stage in a little grove of trees—a baby avenue of plane or lime, something full of leafage in this summer light. Beyond I see a row of hotels, and up above them an old Swiss Cathedral, that looks as if it might hold an organ and some pictures. To the right a monstrous block, like a Russian or English hotel—the *National*, of course. We passed it; it is like my luck to have fixed my lodging there. Shall I go opposite instead? No; I can get a room to the back, perhaps, and then I shall at least look sheer over the lake. But of all places!—it looks as if nothing could ever happen there but the routine of breakfast, luncheon, and dinner, and a band will, perhaps, play upon the shore afterwards. I know the tedious round of occupation, and the sort of English and Americans that will be there. At any rate the house is large; there will be space, and none of these my com-

rades that have beguiled my voyage are going there too.'

Clifford interrupted me again: 'My journal wasa pretty close one in those days, you see,' he said with a smile; 'I suppose it describes how I had my portmanteau taken up in the lift and unpacked it?'

'No,' I answered; 'that last was written in pencil, as just before landing: there is nothing else till the ink has been obtained.'

. . . . . .

'*Midnight.* I have opened my window, which is high up, to let in the warm evening air, and to my wonder I have let in the whole moonlit lake; for when I open the casement square and sit looking out, I can see nothing but sky and water and the young crescent like a horn of promise atop of it all. It is better, realler, nearer than any picture; silent as a picture too, and full of calm. Looking out I can see the mountains to the right still covered with snow, like silver shields of sentinels; or no! again, like only Alps at night. Metaphor is a disease, a not quite seeing the real individuality of things; a fancying identities which is entirely muddledom—I won't

be metaphorical. The hotel is hideous—a square great hall and cold conventional stairway. Could anything in the world make one feel at home in that? People would tell me, that if some woman that one loved were with one, the stairway and the hall would be transfigured. Bosh! I believe no love in the world or out of it could make an hotel like this quite bearable. We were waited on by costumed women; I don't fancy the costumes were ever as stagey as that, but the effect was pretty and unusual, and I ate with an appetite and amused myself again with my neighbours. There was a lady, like a lady off a tomb, with two daughters, one fat and one lean. One was at either side of her: they never uttered a word. The lady had a black jet locket round her neck with a coronet and a W in diamonds. They were plainly and poorly dressed, and shared a pint of the cheapest wine. I was placed opposite to them, and they studied me as a naturalist would a new creature. They exchanged no word even with each other; but they all thought the same thoughts, and I could see them reflected on their faces—two pale and London-worn, one fresh and already bright with the pure air of the hills. At first they imagined me an

Englishman, and approved me, I fancy—the younger one especially; then when I ordered a thin claret like their own, their countenances fell. I was poor, they felt. But my estimation was raised when I answered a neighbour in French; I might be a foreigner and prefer light wine. They strained their ears and heard me purposely explain myself as English; they relapsed into stupor. I might be the very god Apollo; but being poor and English—having neither insular tastes, nor continental titles—I shall never enter into their consciousness more. The *concierge* tells me the lady is Mrs.——something unrecognisable under his pronunciation—a sister of Milord Westlake (whence her claim to the coroneted locket, worn as a hint to the vulgar) who is on a tour with her daughters. 'They are very poor; oh, *monsieur*, very poor; they have a bed-room and a dressing-room; they breakfast on a *thé simple*, they do not lunch; they dine, ah! *monsieur* will have observed they dine.' The *concierge* is not reticent; he contrives that I shall think as little of the great lady as the great lady thinks of me. Would that she could ever respect my art as I respect her perseverance and self-denial! Nobody else occupied me at all. My right-hand

neighbour was a Pole, who wore turquoise rings on all his fingers, and was absorbed in the *menu*. The two places next me on my left were vacant. I heard the waitresses say that the Count would not dine down to-day; he was weaker, and *mademoiselle* his niece had ordered dinner in their own apartments. Who are my neighbours? That at least is something left for the morrow to disclose.'

'You will be weary of it,' said Clifford; 'it is mere scribbling. I used to keep it for my mother (who will never see it now, you know, poor heart!), and send it her from time to time. I never sent it to her after I left Axenstein, and you will find it by-and-by becoming different in tone, and then, soon after, fortunately for your patience, it leaves off altogether.'

I went on:

. . . . . .

'*May* 28. 'Who is my neighbour?' I cannot quite answer that yet. The places next me at dinner are vacant again; as often vacant as not, I am told. They are kept for a Russian noble, who is here with his niece. He is in bad health, and only dines at the public table occasionally, to amuse himself a little, occupying as he does the best suite

of rooms in the hotel. Any eligible stranger is set next to him, on these rare occasions, to make a variety at his monotonous meal. I begin to await his appearance with some interest; meanwhile I content myself with inanimates, failing sympathy in my human surroundings. I have been to-day through the gamut of sensations that a town like this affords; have felt the sadness which lives in a deserted pleasure garden and the solace that comes from a crowded churchyard. I have seen the Lion of Luzern and mourned over its adjuncts, and I have been thrilled by the listless drone of the organ down the blank aisles of the church. I have "done" that part of the town that lies behind my hotel, but have not yet crossed the covered bridges. I have sketched a bit here and there, but otherwise only wasted my day; for I am so well now that mere idleness in the air is not any longer an activity for me as it was. I begin to think that I want a new interest, and, while I wait for it, everything becomes magnified. I can even put significance into a nothing like this.

'I was sitting reading this morning in the public *salon* here, before going out; the room had been empty when I entered it and I had taken up a

gazette and gone to the window and sat down, without volition of my own, charmed by the stillness and the fresh morning air that blew in at the window. I had not sat five minutes when I heard a rustle of silk, and a woman entered the apartment. She never saw me, for she went at once to a table at the end of the room farther from the window and took up a newspaper. She glanced at it and presently put it down, but I watched her as she dived her head between its pages, and her beauty has made a singular impression upon me.

'I say *beauty*, although I have not seen her face, for I am sure she is beautiful from her carriage and the daring of her dress.

'She was like a figure out of a Watteau picture, in a queer brocaded silk dressing-gown all covered with lace, and with a long train from the shoulders; her form is girlish and slight, and it bore the trimmings and furbelows of the costume better than a finer figure would have done; her arms, visible beneath the elbow-sleeves in their bare grace, are quite faultless. She held the paper up, so that I could see the full curve of her right wrist and hand, unmarred by a single bangle. Of her blonde head I could only see the shape and hue, which

were charming; the curls in front, which perhaps cluster over the forehead, are powdered, and must give a singular air of artificial finish to the face, if it is as pure and fair as the arm. When I chanced to rustle my *Galignani* she vanished like a spirit. I have felt ever since a quite unaccountable longing to see her again—to be near her. Evidently she comes but seldom into the public rooms, and then only when they are deserted. I could have believed she was really a ghost; only as I advanced to the table by which she had stood, to see what journal had engaged her attention, I perceived in the air the faintest and most subtle perfume, half of flowers and half of cedar or sandal wood; it hovers round me yet with singular persistence; and I never yet heard of a ghost, even a ghost in a Watteau gown, that scented her handkerchief. The journal she had looked at was nothing in the world but the *Journal pour rire*. I hope the ghost was edified!

'Can it be possible she comes to find it here because she is not allowed to take it in upstairs?—for I fancy she must be no less a person than the Count's niece. It was an extraordinary combination in the morning light and fresh blowing air from my window—the dress of an old picture, the

arm of a young girl, the plentiful fair hair gathered into a firm knot below the shapely head, the powdered curls aglint with gold dust; the shyness of Diana surprised, the *Journal pour rire!* I wonder if they will dine down to-morrow and if she will really be my neighbour.'

'Miss the rest of that day's entry,' said Clifford impatiently, 'and go on to the morrow.'

I scanned the page, and read:

. . . . . .

'Glimpses, glimpses: they don't dine down yet; but what glimpses! This evening, after *table-d'hôte*, I went upstairs to my room to get an overcoat for my evening stroll, the air seeming heavy with rain. It was past eight o'clock—bright sunset time, had not the sky been overcast. I suppose they—not the sunset and the sky, but my neighbours that are to be—dine at eight, for I met her on the stairs, in a sort of evening dress, and carrying a light. It was an old Roman lamp, some treasure-trove from travelling, that I suppose she had been trimming and arranging before she brought it down to their *salon*: the Count's room is with their sitting-room on the first-floor; her room and her maid's room on the floor above. She

was holding the lamp straight before her, and its flare, sheltered by no globe or shade, was full upon her face.

I have never seen a face at all like it before.

The strong light she was carrying must have blinded her from seeing what was before her, for it was not till I stood aside to let her pass that she saw me, and then she slightly bent her head, and looked me full in the face, so seeming, as it were, to photograph her image on my sight. I need not describe it; I have been trying to paint it ever since—it has hold of me; I cannot let it go.'

I paused, remembering the face I had seen sketched in the little pocket-book. Clifford, too, had half raised himself, and he pulled up the portfolio that was against the wall, and drew some studies from it. They were all studies of that face, delicate—fierce, restful—questioning, angelic—devilish. He held them out to me one by one. They were all lit in the same way, from below, the hair being thrown into gloom. Lit from above it might have made a halo that would have balanced better the serpentine half smile, and the eyes, so cruel and so sweet; as it was, the strange charm had all its way.

'What did I tell of her at the time?' he said, sadly, drawing away the diary from my knee, where I sat by his sofa with the drawings in my hand. [redacted] my lady [redacted] what did she say?'

[redacted]

[redacted]ked at me with a longer but less in- than one usually gives to a stranger, [redacted]f she had found someone she was seek- [redacted]a[redacted]hen after an instant she passed on. I looked after her; her gown was of sea-green silk with silver ornaments; it was a sort of demi-toilette gown curiously cut, and hanging in long loose folds from her shoulders. She was like a Nereid—some gracious goddess out of the sea's foam, whose lips should only sing the Siren's song. As she went along the corridor, and I stood on the stairs watching her from above, I heard her softly singing to herself—

> C'est l'Espagne qui nous donne
> Le bon vin!...

'She passed on singing—singing: I watched there long after she was gone, and I had heard the door close behind her in the distance.'

CHAPTER IV.

CLIFFORD'S voice was hoarse and his [illegible] as he laughed rather bitterly and shut the diary. 'I am sure you want your dinner,' he [illegible] have been very patient so far, and we've got to nothing yet except that I saw a lady carrying a lamp, and that instead of singing a hymn she sang a drinking song which you have heard Trebelli sing better a hundred times. That is scarcely remarkable; what *is* remarkable is that I did not forget her look at once when I had sketched it. I had often sketched faces before. You know, Frank, that with me making verses and making sketches is a way of consigning to oblivion, of registering for "Time's wallet"—usually; and I believe that with most painters it is often so. A drawing or a poem is not the shadow of a permanent impression so much as the very throwing off of a transient one; and in most cases, if you are shown a sketch or a copy of

verses, you may be sure that the subject of them is half forgotten. It sounds a paradox, but so it is. But in this case it was not so; this woman's look sought something of me (not admiration, she looked, despite the artifice of her costume, quite free from feminine self-consciousness), something out of my own self—what was truest in me. I did not say that in my journal, because I did not put it into words at the time. The impression that she sought something changed soon into the knowledge that she elicited something; that from the magnetism of her glance, or the electricity of her presence, or whatever else you like to call it, "virtue was gone out of me."'

He looked distressed and pale; I tried to laugh it off, though his air of conviction moved me.

'Such a good boy as you were, Clifford, can afford to spare some of that superfluity.'

He smiled sadly. 'Perhaps I was a good boy, Frank,' he said; 'I had not lost my illusions then, and they stood me in the stead of a religion; at that time they were a beautiful store for any questioning or jaded mind to draw upon; they are gone away from me now. . . . Well—the next day they dined down, the Count and Mlle. de Trekoff—

that, they told me, was her name—and what was strange was, that I had felt no more curiosity at all about whether they would come or not; I knew quite well that she would come.'

'That look of hers had told you a great deal, Clifford?'

'It had; and yet I do assure you it told me nothing that an ordinary young girl's look would have told a man, of interest to prompt such an assurance. I cannot keep feeling that this questioning look was habitual, that it would have been cast upon anything male or female, and that it was something in me that answered it—I do not know what, unless it was my surprise.'

I looked again at Clifford. He had certainly now an aspect that justified his reasoning; that look of thought and listening that some consumptive people get, and that often invites confidence. How it might have been with him in health I could not tell, for I remembered him more boyish; but I could fancy a blending of this attentive aspect with the fulness of red lips and the sanguine glow of manhood which could not help being attractive to the very highest degree; and a woman's eyes are quicker than a man's. I was inwardly rather

sceptical as to the intellectuality of Mlle. la Comtesse de Trekoff's demand.

'And now,' he broke off again, 'you shall dine, and I will tell you how I dined with her, and how the English gorgons watched us, and took in the cut of her gown and the measure of her charm with the same stony glare. My journal shall be silent, for it contains nothing else of regular entry, but I have elsewhere the records of some conversations, which I will read you in their order.'

We went upstairs, to prepare ourselves for dinner, lingering a while on our way, in the dark studio, which presented a melancholy aspect; little of the artist's apparatus was so much as unpacked; just here and there was a canvas on which some outline had been traced, and there was one standing with its face against the wall, the subject upon which I did not need to be told. When Clifford turned it for me towards a jet of gas upon the stairway I saw a hastily painted presentment of Mlle. de Trekoff in the sea-green gown. It was a clever picture though unfinished, full length and remarkable for force and vivacity, the face alone bearing traces of careful toil; the eyes were quite finished, and looked out from the canvas with a

very magical gaze; but in the chill dusk it made me feel wretched to look at the portrait of this glowing woman, turned to the light by the wan hand of my poor friend; it was if he were showing me as golden the casket into which he had locked his life, and it was only tinsel.

As we stood so, I heard a knock at the door, and Clifford had another spasm of trembling, such as I had felt him labour under in the transept of the Crystal Palace. He took no notice of it, however, beyond setting the picture back and motioning me into the room prepared for me, while he went into his own, which adjoined it.

My room looked out over the road, and as I went to the window to ascertain my whereabouts, a mounted groom rode away from the door. When I came down again to the quiet sitting-room in the back part of which our dinner was laid, I saw a basket of rare hot-house flowers on the writing-table; they were arranged with great skill and taste, and their perfume—prevalently that of scented daphne—filled the apartment. Somehow I recalled to myself suddenly the Crystal Palace sculpture-room—an unlikely place enough to be conjured up by the smell of flowers—and woke to the re-

collection that it was in passing out of it that I had first perceived this delicate perfume, the very same that poor Clifford had noticed in the reading-room of the hotel at Luzern.

He came down presently, but without seeming to have refreshed himself by the *négligé* costume he had put on; as he passed the writing-table he took a tiny cluster of the exquisite blossom and fastened it into his button-hole, but otherwise he did not notice what I had hoped would have been a pleasurable surprise to him, and the advent of such flowers was evidently common enough.

As we dined, his strength seemed to return a little, and presently he went on: 'I do not tell you, Frank, about my present state; you see what that is, and I want to save my breath. I get weaker and weaker; I am not ill but I am dying; that is another paradox, and perhaps the most literal among the many I am telling you. It is of the past that I wish to speak; its trivial things have become very important to me, because they sum up my life!'

He paused, and then after drinking some wine he continued: 'That next day I took my place at the table, quite certain that she would come, and

dinner was hardly begun when the Count entered; he placed himself at first next to me, until some minutes had elapsed and Mlle. de Trekoff had not joined us; then he moved up to speak to his left-hand neighbour who was a previous acquaintance, having just wished me a polite "good-evening" in English. My heart beat fast as I saw that he was leaving vacant the place between himself and me; nor had he any intention of returning to it, as he commenced his dinner still talking to his friend. The meal was half over before I, not daring to look round, saw reflected in the gorgon eyes of my female compatriots opposite me, that she was coming; and in another moment she glided into her place between the Count and me, with an instant's hesitation, but naturally without embarrassment. I turned and looked at her as I pushed back my chair to allow her room to pass—I could not help it—and she was about to bow without answering my glance when—I can only express it to myself like this, Frank—I felt of a sudden that *she knew it was I.* She bowed more slightly even than she would have done, and turned at once to her uncle. "*N'en mange pas trop, mon cher,*" she said to him in a low, quick voice, looking at a

rather rich dish that he was eating. It was such a funny utterance, Frank, I felt as if Milo's Venus had said "By Jove!" She gave her *vis-à-vis* a momentary regard, and then settled herself to her dinner. Oh! she was not a goddess; she ate well, and enjoyed her food. For my part I could not eat; I began to feel upon me a strange want to say something to her, to stop her short in the middle of her meal, to bring her to her senses. I don't suppose there was ever an odder juxtaposition of opposites. She had a fragile look, and was strong; I had a strong look, and was weak I suppose always; she was cool and I was hot; she unconscious, I conscious; she quite unmoved by my neighbourhood, I head over ears in love with her already and, to sum it all up, she was she, and I was I. And yet, and yet . . . . in her eyes was that asking look that "*finds*," as Coleridge says, "*and finding again seeks on;*" it was to be hers to take and mine to give, it is to be hers to live and mine to die.'

He was growing weaker. I poured out some wine for him and he drank it, and went on by-and-by:

'After awhile she spoke to me, in English; I

suppose her unerring eyes had easily detected my nationality.

'"I nearly ran you down upon the stairs," she said, her manner as beyond reproach as her words were familiar. "When I am carrying that lamp I cannot see before me, the glare blinds me."

'"To me," I said, "you looked like a meteor, and I was too clumsy to get out of your way; it was my fault that we encountered.'

'"Was it?" she said, and half smiled. She looked me over, Frank, as if I were a piece of furniture, until my ears tingled with the glow.

'"Well," she said at last, "we encountered at all events, and I always take an encounter like that as an introduction."

'I bowed and behaved no doubt like a delighted idiot, for she went on after a pause, speaking to me as if I were much younger than herself—instead of which we were I believe much of an age,

'"Tell me about yourself; you are an artist."

'Only the faintest foreign accent was apparent in her speech: I heard it in a question—then for instance. I answered her most honestly—for somehow our mere personal nearness to each other

seemed to make us old friends at once—that Yes; I was an artist, and not a rich one; that I was a widow's only son, and was beginning to find out that the world's verdict was not as flattering as my mother's; that I owed my apparently robust health to coming to Switzerland; that I had been educated at an English tutor's; that I was, in fine, the sort of man that generally turns out a failure. (I slur over our talk, though I remember every word of it.) Where I was diffident she did not make pretty speeches; where I was confidential she did not repel me. I felt that I could talk to her, and gradually there grew upon me the conviction that she, too, wanted to talk to me. Our shy selves set forward to find each other at once; indeed, the journey was not long. We spoke of artist life and of life's aim. Presently she said this to me (I quote it because it strikes the key-note of our intercourse, perhaps indeed of her interest in me): "*You are happy in having your illusions; I wish you could make them mine.*" Does it seem strange to you, Frank, knowing how heart-whole I was, that I swore to myself before dinner was done, that—come what might, toil or pleasure, disappointment or reward—I would have her share those illusions at

least. For she spoke like a creature in whom the life has never really started, although the mere living has reached perfection. The glimpse I had of her existence was like looking at the miraculous blossom of some scentless aloe ; not to let it pass—to give it worth—these became my negative and positive motives.

'Did she tell you anything about herself?'

He hesitated, and a quick blush gathered on his brow.

'Yes—no,' he answered thoughtfully : she told me that she and the Count—'

'Her uncle?'

'Her uncle,' he repeated slowly—'were traveling because the Count's health was declining, none could tell how or why ; and he was restless for change. It was in a subdued and rather anxious tone that she said this, and she added louder : "He is not really ill, but he gets bored ; we have tried cities but we come back to mountains, and now their charm is gone. Do not get bored ; it is a horrible complaint."

'I did not say to her the obvious commonplaces about the Count's not being bored in her company and the rest of it, such as I might have said to a

pretty chance neighbour, first, because of her own earnestness, and then because I saw, despite her lighter tone, that there was matter for grave anxiety. I looked across her at the Count and perceived—I can't tell you how, Frank, in one of those flashes that come to one sometimes, struck out from the flint and steel of a word and a look—that, unless something stemmed the tide, he was a dying man. It was as if I could see his life ebbing away while she sat radiant by him. He could not eat and he looked weary; but he could talk a little to his neighbour, and he seemed amused at things still with rather a satirical pleasure. I noticed, for instance, that he observed the gorgons with delight! Between his niece and himself there scarcely passed a syllable, yet their understanding of each other seemed complete; when they did speak it was merely some rapid commonplace from him in French or some word of warning from her, about his eating and drinking, thrown in while she talked on to me. There was no charm in her talk beyond its ease; she was a woman waiting for a soul, though her beauty and her grace were at their height.

'Well, Frank, dinner is not interminable, and this meal was over but too soon. I had told her

my name; and just as she rose to leave the table and I stood up to let her pass, she drew back and, after an instant's hesitation, presented me to the Count, simply as "the English painter, Mr. Clifford Gray."

'I do not suppose he had ever heard my name: It was just a whim of hers.

He bowed to me courteously, made some apposite little remark about lake and mountain tints, in the tone of one accustomed to say something on all subjects and caring nothing for any,—that well-bred amateurish tone so disgusting to artists, but in this instance saved by his graceful manner from its sting,—and put his arm through hers, that firm supple arm with the unbroken curve from elbow to finger that had first shown me what manner of woman she was. I stood and watched them as they passed out—an interesting couple; the tall, beautifully-dressed girl, with such an air about her, and the bowed man, not old either, gradually waning towards the insignificance of the tomb—"going over to the majority," Frank, as old Baxter used to call it!

'I remember them, and the evening light about them; the lake and skyward mountains to the left,

and the *débris* of the dinner-table to the right. I suppose I stood there like a fool. . . .'

He paused and sighed.

'That was our first conversation; nothing very unusual, was it? but since then I have had no thought of my heart that was not hers. I do not know if I fell in love with her at first; I loved her dearly afterwards; what I felt was, that I went out of myself to her whether I would or no.'

He pushed his chair away from the table and put his head between his hands; after a minute or two he roused himself and went on in a different tone.

'By the way, I acquired importance in the gorgons' eyes at once; whether my senses were dazed or whether some charm from Mlle. de Trekoff was upon me I know not, but when I reseated myself to finish my wine I chanced to raise my eyes to theirs. They were quite transfigured, their somewhat grim and eager faces were wreathed in smiles, and, after a prelude of courteous bows, the mother-gorgon accosted me.

'"Is it *possible* that we have the pleasure of speaking to Mr. Clifford Gray, the *eminent* painter? My daughters and I are so *interested* in art, and

we know your work so *well* on the Academy walls." (I had had my first two mountain pieces skied there the year before; none of my best friends had been able to discover them, and if they had made them out they could not have seen up there whether they represented lakes or glaciers.)

'I bowed and deprecated the "*eminency*" of my name, but she would not be set aside; she shook her stony head and smiled. Why go on, Frank? You know the cant and hypocrisy of it all. She felt that I was near the rose, and I was sweet to her; I had become a person of importance for the moment.'

We had finished dinner—Clifford, indeed, long since; but we lingered at the table, while he went on.

'Such importance as I had at Luzern, Frank, to cut a long story short, came entirely from her and the gorgon-trumpeters. From that day I belonged to her, and they devoted their energies to watching us. They had plenty to observe no doubt; you know that I am not one to deny myself fresh sensations, and the pleasure of her company was a new world to me. My painting was neglected, except so far as it helped me to register

her presence here or there. But she sat to me, and I completed a portrait of her for the Count, which is, I believe, to be exhibited. He insisted upon paying me—and paid me well—and I am conscious that I have put my best work into it. In the picture she is seated spinning—she had a spinning wheel, at which she would sit and amuse herself of evenings, and we chose it for her occupation because it wearied her to sit quite idle. The contrast between her rich evening dress—she is in full dress of some diaphanous stuff—and the simple adjunct of the wheel is as curious as all the contrasts in her and about her were. You must see that picture; it is typical; she was fate, spinning the web of her own life, and drawing my life into it.

'I hurry on, because I have much to say, or, if I cannot say it, much for you to read. You know how these things happen at hotels; how quickly acquaintances ripen, when once a fancy has sprung up. In a few days I became intimate with the Count, and with her. By-and-by she wished to have lessons. She had devoted a great deal of time to drawing ever since she could re[illegible] she had nothing to unlearn; her sense [illegible] was extraordinary, and she had a wonder[illegible]

ness and skill that enabled her at once to assimilate all she was taught. The Count was an invalid, we were much together, and I noticed her manner improving and improving, as if she were entering on a new sphere. She became gentler, less exaggerated in movement and tone; at the same time she gained strength and skill; she began to be an artist.

'Frank, it is here that what is tragic comes into my story. So long as she wished me to paint well, I excelled—that picture of her, which you will one day see, is far and away the best I have ever painted; but as soon as ever she wished to paint well herself, my own inclination—which is after all one's excellence—decreased. I wished that she should do well, I did not care what became of me. I devoted my energies to teaching her. I ceased to care for prospects of fame or wealth, I have wholly lost care of them now. I cared that she should excel; I lost myself in her, keeping only one reward in view, that she should love me.'

'Well,' I said, 'you might have done worse; love brings its own reward; and that is surely a phase of love, the feeling that one gives all one can; but let a man feel that he is loved again, and he gets back an hundred-fold.'

'It may be so,' he answered, gravely, 'but one is not rewarded in kind: one gives life, one gets death; one gives certainty, one gets uncertainty; one gives time, one gets eternity. Only her return to me is not yet begun. Frank,' he added, rising, 'I sent for you to talk to you; but I cannot talk any more to-night, and the time is passing, my life is going from me. I must rest, I am sure she is somewhere near me. . . I am exhausted . . . let me lie down.'

I was alarmed, and led him to the sofa.

'I cannot talk and soften things in speech,' he said. 'You must read all. When I left off writing my journal, I kept records of our talks together, as if I were writing the history of her soul. From being an artist I became a scientist, and gave my time to watching her. From these pages you will learn all, except the secret of her power over me: for that I can give you only the old reason that she was she, and I was I.'

He got up from the couch and drew from beneath its pillow another book which he gave me. It was fastened by a key, and the key was secured to his watch-chain. He took off his watch and chain to give me the key. 'Wind up my watch

with the other key,' he said, 'about eleven, or bring it to me in my room, when you come up to bed. I shall go and lie down there; the servant will be coming in to clear away the things, and I should not be able to rest here; but I shall not go to bed yet myself; my day is not yet done, only I am tired—I am very tired, Frank, and I want rest.'

'Good-night,' I said, as I took the book. 'You may be asleep when I come in, and if so I shall not disturb you.'

'Good-night,' he said, and smiled; 'you will not disturb me.' As soon as I was alone I unlocked the book, whence I select certain passages, and read.

. . . . . .

CHAPTER V.

'*June* —.—To-day has been one of those summer days that seem to have a taste in them of each best month in the year—April airs, May fragrance, June colour, July sun, and August calm; and it is still so far spring that one feels the pulses of one's blood flowing, not ebbing yet. One's sense is quickening, and the world is ripe. It has been a day when one longs for mountain quiet and the pure breath of the snow, and yet when a certain fatigue, born of content, keeps one roving about streets and gardens, and disinclines one for excursions; a day to go down to the shore and look at one's boat, but not launch it; to sit by this open window at one's easel and not draw a stroke; to watch energetic people set out a-pleasuring and congratulate oneself upon not joining them; the sort of day when, without having any occupation that presses, one never finds oneself at home in

time for meals. And I have had my first walk with Véra.

That is her name—Véra—four little letters and a dash atop of one of them; the four quarters of my whole world and their crown! Truth's very self.

'It came about like this. I was roaming along with my untouched sketch-book, by the lake, when I met her with the Count. I stayed talking with them some time, and then, as he seemed rather less weak than usual, I proposed that they should walk with me to one of the covered bridges, not far from where we were, on which they told me was depicted the Dance of Death. The Count, indeed, had forgotten the subject of the painting, and only remembered it as we neared our destination; when, with an invalid's caprice, he became inclined to go no farther himself although not wishing to hinder our going—it having been originally Véra's own wish to show me the paintings, which she knew that I had not yet seen.

'We left the Count at a *restaurant*, to refresh himself with some light wine, and buy *bonbons* for the children of some friends of his whom we met returning from the lake, and it was with a secret

sense of exhilaration that at his leave we quickened our pace, and went on walking alone together—delightfully contrasted words *alone*, *together*. It was the first time we had found ourselves so, and because of it, thrice blessed be this day!

'I cannot set down in prose any more than I can on canvas the way she walks. Comparison has no likeness for it. Like the moon upon the waters, like a swayed flower—these have something to do with it, because they mean purity and sweetness, but nothing else; she is so buoyant, so sure.

'I walked with Véra alone; let me set down that again and think of it. For a while neither of us spoke; each felt that the other was happy, and neither liked to hint at it. But her pleasure, I could see, was not the same as mine; I gave myself up to gladness. Véra, I think, wished for her uncle's sake that she had not been glad. If she is truth's self she is duty's soul. She was the first to speak. I do not think I should have uttered a word until now had she kept silence!

'"I like," she said, "to show you things: it is a sort of repayment for all you are teaching me."

'Véra, O my mother (for this is for you, I hope, to read one day), speaks with the slightest foreign

accent, which gives her words a singular precision and distinctness, and that, perhaps, is why I recollect them all (and perhaps it is not why!).

'"Yes, I know," I answered, for with Véra I never affect not to know what she means; I am tutorial since she is my pupil. "It is always a pleasure to give."

'"Do you think it so? You are always giving to me." Little idle words, but in that thrilling tone with what a charm, like lute-music!

'We stopped at a corner where a child was selling flowers, common Alpine flowers, blue gentian and edelweiss. She took out her purse. "Buy me some flowers," she said. I gave the child a little coin from the pretty net, an old-fashioned toy of silver and gold thread, and then bought her some flowers with another coin from my own pocket. She smiled, but did not thank me.

'"You will not deny yourself this pleasure of giving?" she said.

'"I will stint it," I answered, and kept a bit of the gentian—it is like her eyes—and this last half-hour I have been making a drawing of it in my note-book.

'We walked on, Véra and I. It was high noon, and the sun brought out the unsavoury scents of

the little town we passed through, in alley and corner. Ever as she moved beside me I breathed that perfume as of flower essence and sandalwood that she carries. It is vague, indefinable, refreshing but faint as when one stoops over some flower they call scentless and detects its rare perfume: it makes a sort of coolness round her that seems to draw my feverish ardours into it. She wore a morning dress of the softest slightest stuff, nearly all white, and gathered everywhere with lace into far prettier folds than I could draw, and she had a gold chain round her neck with symbolic Russian pendant, her only ornament. She was all virginal white and rose, with delicate red lips and burnished hair: the people looked at her as she passed, and I, Clifford Gray, walked on beside her with my sketch-book. It could not last for ever—as a matter of fact it did not last five minutes; and then we came to the bridge.

'"This is very pleasant," she said.

'We left the sun outside. The place is a roofed colonnade of old brown wood, but the light glimmers and glints in at all corners—Swiss light, that you can almost take hold of like a gem. Through the chinked floor you see the dancing water; through

the open sides you see as it were framed pictures of lake and hill and town; and the light strikes up hard and strong on to the black roof, where in a series of arched panels all along is the allegory of the Dance of Death:—why painted there, why set there, who shall tell? only, once being there, for ever the fittest message for men that cross the bridge, passing and repassing across this end of the lake from Luzern to Luzern—and below you hear the women, busy and bare-armed, washing linen in the lake-water, and beating it with stones, as they gossip and quarrel, singing and laughing.

'There we stood in the June morning, silent at first, because you come out of the sunlight into what seems a dark passage, until you are upon it; and then no longer silent, because the charm of the place was about us, and we could speak plain.

'I said, "Thank you for bringing me here. I have waited day after day to come, I don't know why, feeling drawn towards the little bridge, and yet disinclined to visit it alone. I suppose that was because I was to come with you."

'"Yes, that was it," she answered; "and almost when first I saw you I thought of this bridge of mine, and felt that I must bring you here." She

spoke with as little self-consciousness as a bird sings, but sadly.

'"I wonder why we met," she said, after some trivial words of mine.

'"I know," I answered, boldly and surely. "It was because I have something I can give you, something that can help you to round your life to fuller perfectness."

'"Is it to be all mine?" she said.

'"If you will have it," I answered; and the lake shone and the river ran, and the women went on at their toil, but something new and glorious had come into our day.

'No one passed: the people of the town were indoors or at their labour, the hotel folk were lunching or taking their siesta. Véra took off her hat, a light and shady one—woven of some sort of grass, but woven in Paris—and leaned over the parapet of the bridge, letting the breeze fan the light curls on her forehead. I stood by her, resting against one of the angles of the supports. Overhead was Death coming to one or the other, lady, labourer, boor, as he comes to all.

'"Yes; I feel to want you," she said, slowly, and as if speaking to someone not really present. "Mr.

Gray, I am sure that we are not like strangers, that we never were strangers. I cannot explain it to you: explanation is not my *forte*. I have felt the same sort of thing about other people, but not to this extent. Do not misunderstand me," she added, as I drew closer under the spell of her first words, and then recoiled a little at this colder tone, "it has neither been for their happiness nor my good; in fact, now I think of it, they have generally suffered."

'"I would suffer too," I answered readily.

'"I think you would," she said dreamily. "I think you must: you have a giving nature, I have not; I feel myself growing, and I feel the need of growth; I want help, I want more power, more life."

'She spoke earnestly, fervently: her glance magnetised me (was this Mlle. de Trekoff, who went along the corridor singing *C'est l'Espagne*?).

'"Will you help me?" she said; and so saying, laid with gentlest touch her hand upon my arm.

'It was scarcely for an instant, but I do not think that in all my lifetime I shall lose the sense of that touch. I have it upon me now, the feeling that she drew something away from me, that I do not possess my soul as I did this morning. A foolish feeling—away with it!

'"I will do all I can," I said. I felt that my will was mine no longer: what did words avail? Presently, and as if the touch had made a link between us, Véra went on.

'"The Count has done much for me. I am grateful, after my manner. It is not in me to be very grateful to people, but the Count—my uncle you know—is waning fast. He will die, Mr. Gray."

'It would have been a shock to me to hear her so coldly state what I had seen myself, with apprehension and alarm, had she been other than she is; but she seems capable of grasping life and death; I cannot but think one would be, not the farther but the nearer, not the less present but the more present, to her in death than in life.

'"He will die," she said, "and I cannot be sorry. Is not that extraordinary? Daily, hourly, as he gets weaker and weaker, I feel my own life expand: look at me." She turned round and faced me bare-headed in the full light, strong and fair as a child or an angel. "Look at me! Time was when I was so frail and slight and fanciful, it was thought I could not live. I had some intelligence and some good looks, nothing else, except a great longing, capacity, desire. The Count—my uncle—reared me." She

paused, and her fingers disarranged the hat she held. "I am telling you of what was not long ago, although it seems to concern quite another *me*. I have not been with him long, but he has reared me, and it has cost him his life. He was bright and well. Only see him now, he fades and gets sadder. I grow glad and strong. I tell you I am like a plant that grows on graves."

'I laughed at the comparison, feeling withal a strange solemnity upon me. I looked at her, and thought of the violets that grow in the Roman cemetery upon Shelley's grave: there are no violets quite so fragrant or so beautiful as those.

'"You laugh," she said, "and I am not sorry that you laugh now; but I don't know whether you will laugh by-and-by. Watch, and you will see what I mean. I tell you I cannot explain things, but I can understand them. I am not stupid, and what I comprehend I keep, and what I love I do not let go. I do not feel sorrow, I do not believe in loss. I believe in joy and gain."

'Her words cut themselves into my memory, like her aspect, as she stood beneath the Dance of Death. I pointed upwards to the picture.

'"Is all that joy and gain?" I said.

"'Yes,' she answered me quickly. 'All of it, *someone's* joy and gain. I don't know about afterwards, I am not religious. I do not believe—I know; I do not think—I feel; but assuredly nobody ever died but that his death was someone's gain, or rather that isn't what I mean, though it holds the fact of it. I mean nobody ever lived but his *life* was someone's gain; and so narrowing it down, it seems to me that, if I choose it, nobody ever lived but his life might be *my* gain; and I do choose it—not always, but of certain people. I want their lives: let them give them to me.'

"'I would give you mine,' I said.

"'Yes,' she answered, and then went on more impetuously—'Yes, you give me yours: it is something, but not all. I shall absorb it, but afterwards I want more life. These are but the properties of my acting; beyond them I want a sphere, a stage. I shall use your life here, do not be afraid: and beyond life I want a sphere again, where at last I may begin to live: it is all prelude yet.'

'The light of a truth was on her as she spoke, mastering her words. I could only listen and take up my fate, and with my fate I am content. It is onesided, I know: she does not love me, perhaps

she may love me by-and-by, but when she loves me she will have ceased to be my Véra of to-day. Meanwhile, I shall do for her what I can, and I feel it is not little.

'There we made our pact in the glancing sunlight, under the Dance of Death. It takes long in writing; it was not long in speaking. A quarter of an hour brought us back to the Count, and that was after we had paced once up and down the little bridge in silence, *alone together.*

'Then she said: "Come, Mr. Gray, I have talked a great deal of nonsense, and you have been very patient: take me back to my uncle," and so walked along again by my side, through the streets, humming the *Chanson de Fortunio* indeed, but with my sprig of gentian in her dress. . . .

'And I, too, I who write here late on into the night, have my sprig of gentian by me all the while. I have opened my window to let in again the large silence of the night into my little room, that seems all crowded and alive with memories of word and touch; and the night has its message. It says surely: "*Give, as I am giving, without seeking reward; it is not in vain that I spread out my splendours, my perfume and my peace, and waste*

myself till daylight. Some heart will take me in, in some breast I shall become comfort and joy and help; and this is nature's life, for ever. Ask not what has become of passed sunlight and shadow, whither have vanished the glory-rays on tree and hill; look into your friend's life and find them there. Sunsets and moonrises and pine fragrances, these all enter into the heart of man, and live their human life out so. And you, be not you less generous than nature, sink your life in another's: be not careful of it—give!"

'Good-night, Véra.'

CHAPTER VI.

'*Lausanne. Evening. July* —.—That a month should have run on, and I not set pen to paper! I only do it now, because in unpacking my drawing materials I unpacked this journal, and its blank page stares me still tiresomely in the face. I have a disinclination to write, I am preoccupied.

'We arrived here some days ago, and are at the *Inn of the fair stream* on Geneva. The town begins to be full, and we are quieter here.

'"*We*," that is a fresh word in my journal. It means the Count, and Mlle. de Trekoff, and myself, Clifford Gray, enrolled henceforth her artist and her servitor. The Count is better, and Véra wonderful. How he loves her! he cannot bear her to be away from him, and yet her presence exhausts him. If only he could be persuaded to leave her, I cannot but think (irrationally perhaps) that all might yet be well. But what would she do, what indeed *will* she do without him, for it must come to that? They seem to

have no relatives but each other, and although she does not love him, he is necessary to her. Dare one write one's hopes? No! the paper must not show them back to one.

'The gorgons, seeing that we would have none of them, made the *National* unbearable for us with their watching glances. They had an eye of mistrust for Véra and an eye of compassion for me; that was their last position, and the most insulting. She had no sort of care for them, but she read their thoughts, and they began to weary her sight; so she gave the Count a signal—almost too slight to be called a wish and much less a command—to quit Luzern, and he arranged immediately that they should go to Lausanne, and that I should accompany them hither, that Véra might not have to discontinue lessons in which she is making progress.

'I suppose I have no talent for teaching. It is not that she is not apt to learn, but the lessons I give fatigue me so, that I am unable to continue my own painting afterwards; and yet they are privileges that there is no man living would not envy me. To be near my lady, to hear her voice, to share her thoughts—for there were never friends more intimate than she and I are become!

'Nor is it really tiring to teach her. She learns, and supplements my teaching with ever-increasing talent. She is never impatient, never weary: she makes all life give way for her; she knows what she wants, and she will get it; for to know your aim is the surest secret to success. I had an aim, but I have given it up. I am not sure that there is not a certain sort of success in that too: we shall see.

'We draw in the mornings—lovely mornings, that Véra says sometimes, with a sudden return upon her old self, are "like champagne and seltzer;" and in the afternoon we drive or wander about; and in the evenings I go on the lake in a boat, or sometimes sit upon the little pier that goes straight out into mid-water opposite the hotel gardens. I see it from the window of the *dépendance* of the hotel where I have my room, and where I write now.

'And Véra is changed. I who, perplexed though I was at first sight of her, would not have altered a tone or a contrast in her, find to my surprise that it is I that am changing her. She seems to have somehow sprung a soul, to have started a desire for immortality: to be with her is like being with a creature who is thirsty, and whose thirst, with infinite and incomprehensible pain to oneself, one

can help to quench. At times I can hardly stand the strain of it. I get away from her, as now, when I can hear her singing in the garden beneath my window, in a mellow under-voice, as a thrush sings in a lilac bush, singing from content. The sound of her voice is like a spell, I cannot write. I sit staring at the paper until a pause comes in the song, and then I can find myself again—but only for a moment.

'She wanders up here often after dinner while the Count sleeps. I feel when she is coming, and I cannot resist going out to meet her. Then we talk a while in this midsummer night which is like day, and perhaps I return with her to the hotel, where we either take our coffee in the verandah, or join the Count, if he is wakeful enough for our society, in his *salon* on the first floor.

'I hear her singing now. Little book, I shall not write in you much longer to-night. Oh! I don't care what it is. It may be anything, the refrain of a valse, or a people's song, just what she heard last, or what amused her for the moment; but for me it is precisely what it should be, and fits the evening better than Mozart. I look out of my window, and I see her coming slowly up the slight ascent.

'This *dépendance* is like a separate cottage, and in quite a different style to the hotel. It stands to the right of it as you look from the lake, rather farther back and higher up, amid rockwork and shrubs. The greater part of it is occupied by some Americans, former acquaintances of mine, who are here from year to year; and as I sometimes go boating early with their boys, they have induced me to take a vacant room here, which they want to reserve for their eldest son, now at Oxford, who is paying some visits to friends in England before returning here to complete his long vacation. This enables the youngsters to call me betimes without trotting over to the hotel and waking other folk less inclined than I have been for morning stretches.

'There is another reason for my liking to be here, which seems anomalous even to myself. I sleep better when not under the same roof with Véra.

'Her name again! I knew the sentence would round itself to that. I go to my window; she is coming nearer, nearer; moving up the narrow walk between the rockwork borders, and the moonlight is on her hair. She is all white—not indeed dressed in white, but standing in such a flood of radiance

that the soft tones of her dress are bleached into a silver haze. She looks like a wood nymph dressed by Worth and turned to a pillar of salt! I must go out and tell her so. Hush! . . .

'"Come out!" She does not call me, for she knows that I am listening, she just speaks. "Come out, it is quite lovely, and you cannot see to draw; besides, I want you to tell me why the moonlight kills all the pretty colours in my gown."

'What was the song that was sung of the Sirens to tempt Ulysses? *We know all things. Come and learn*, that was its watchword, and good enough for early days; but the Siren of to-day knows man's vanity better. She says not *Come and learn*, but *Come and teach*—and besides I am not Ulysses!

'"Come out," she says. She used to call me Mr. Gray, to fix my attention; now she calls me nothing, knowing I am attent; will she ever call me Clifford, because I am hers, and as worth a name as her dog is or her bird? I think so.

'"I am coming." There, I have written it before I can say it, and I have pushed my chair aside already. What is left but just to run down stairs and we are together; and were there a river to pass

and a hill to climb—nay, were there an ocean to ford and a mountain to scale we should be together, I think, as soon.

. . . . . .

'*Midnight.*—Let me write it if I can! Anything to still this throbbing heart, to stop this burning restlessness. Let me look at it dispassionately—stupid word!—and say, "*This has come to you, Clifford Gray.*" . . .

'I wrote that five minutes ago. Since then I have been hearing my pulses like a pent-up flood till all my senses are confounded within me. "This has come to you, Clifford Gray—has come to you? nay, has been near you this last month, and you have missed sight of it because you are blind and a fool." The great boon, Love. She loves me. . . . Does she love me?

'I cannot sleep, I must write it all. If I could tell someone it might help me to support its glorious overwhelming tide. If I tell you, little book, will you hold it? Will you not burst your clasp and cry, "She loves him!" No! you stupid little book, if I were to write in you *white is white* and *black is black*, you would care just as much. You are cold, cold, little book, and I curse you, though you are to be my comfort.

Blot you, little book! But ah! you will hold it, and tell nobody what nobody must know yet. Bless you, little book!

'Little book! I went downstairs to her, just as I am now, in my loose velvet coat and the clothes and boots in which I have been tramping about all day, and just with a hat on my head that I snatched from a peg in the passage—went half against my will, because I began to fancy that I was cherishing vain dreams, out of which I had for my own sake best tear myself as I could—and so joined her in the garden among the rockwork, underneath the moon. She had some lace tied round her head—old yellowish lace—in which her face looked very vivid, even in the moonlight, which else had blanched her so.

'I went down to her, rough and ready as I am. She was waiting for me, fair and lovely, in her delicate laces and her pearls. She was like the moon waiting for Endymion to fall asleep, tired, in his shepherd habit on the hills. We walked down towards the hotel, talking idly as we went.

'"He is asleep," she said, "but not as usual from fatigue. It is strange that I should feel so sure of it, but he seems to me to be gradually resuming his life—he will awake refreshed."

"Are you not glad?" I said.

"I should be, I suppose," she answered, thoughtfully, and with a musing smile; "but it seems to me as if my being indifferent were just the condition of his getting well. *I want nothing of him now; let him get well.* That is my feeling of our attitude towards each other; I can't explain it; it is my fault, not his."

"You do not love him," I said, looking down at her searchingly. She lifted her head after a moment, and returned my look.

"I do not love him," she said, as with an effort. "No. It seems cruel, does it not? but it is not cruel, it is kind."

She paused, and I did not answer. It pleased me to hear her speak like this. I did not know why then—now I know!

We went down to the lake-front of the hotel, and entered the public rooms by the verandah. There was no one in the large drawing-room, and it had an eerie look with its bright lights fighting against the sharp moonlight outside.

A piano was standing open. She went across to it and began vaguely playing, after a moment, the *Chanson de Fortunio*

'I threw myself into a chair by the piano; she went on playing, otherwise there was silence. Some flying creature flew in at the window and got burned in the gas. That was all I noticed, and I wished it had not happened. She looked up from the keys and laughed when she heard it singe.

'I wished she had not laughed. A moment afterwards she looked at me with her eyes troubled and sad. "That hurt you," she said.

'"Do you like to see things suffer?" I asked her.

'"I don't know. I have no instinct of it," she said, quickly; and then, "I used to, I don't think I do now. I am full of all sorts of new sensibilities of late. I do not know myself. How one alters, and how much there is left to feel; how many changes there are still left to ring in life!"

'She rose abruptly and added: "I will see if he is ready for his coffee." Then she went out of the room.

'I was languid, listless. I shut my eyes an instant, and felt a sort of effort in coming back to myself, as one feels when one is weak or overtired. I put my hand on the ledge of the piano to raise myself, and touched something cold and twisted. I took it up and looked at it under

the light. It was a sort of large lizard set with precious stones, an ornament that she had detached from her wrist when she sat down to the piano. It was not a pretty ornament, clumsy though curious. I was still looking at it when she came back.

'"Ah!" she said, "my chameleon!"

'"Is it a bracelet?" I asked her.

'"Yes; he hooks into this bangle on my arm, but I always take him off if I sit down to write or play, because he rattles."

'"He is not very well made," I said.

'"There you blame no artist," she answered, laughing, "because he is real. Death has not dealt prettily with him, but he has lived."

'"Has it been a real lizard?" I asked, laying it down again, for I have an unaccountable loathing for reptiles.

'"Yes," she answered, taking up the creature with a gentleness that was not tender but indifferent, and fastening it by two little hooks on to her bangles. "He has been a real chameleon—not a lizard—and if you like I will tell you his story, for I am very fond of him now, though I experimented upon him when he was alive. But not here: the Count is still

asleep, and I see that his sleep does him more good than even his coffee, with our company. Come; I want you to please me. Take me out upon the lake in the moonlight. I know you row yourself sometimes of an evening, and it is fine. See, I have brought down my wraps."

'In effect she had brought down a soft cloak of some down or feathers, which she was holding round her as she spoke. I needed no invitation; I roused myself in an instant, lit my cigarette at her request, and accompanied her to the shore of the lake. There is a boat-house there, which belongs to my friends here at the *dépendance*, and where I had stored the boat in which I had rowed during this afternoon. I had the key in my pocket still, and a few moments saw us afloat upon the calm waters of Geneva.

'"About the chameleon," she said, settling herself in the cushions and pulling the ropes through her arms, and her voice sounded very fresh in the stillness. "He belonged to a friend of mine, when I was quite a little girl: he had been brought by her from Syria, and usedto live in a small conservatory at the back of her boudoir. She was an old English lady, with whom I stayed when I went to England

for my education, if I hadn't had which, I couldn't talk to you now—is that right? I cannot quite manage your relative sentences yet."

'I laughed as I assured her once more that her English was perfect, and in the beauty of the night, and under the charm of her voice, I felt my fatigue leaving me as the breeze fanned me while I rowed. I awaited some touching story.

'"*Bien*! The chameleon was her pet, and I used to watch it for hours. I never loved things, I scarcely do even now: but I liked to see it writhe up the wires that were put for it, and hang by one tiny claw, or lie basking in the sunlight on its back, changing its pattern and its hue; and better still, I liked to watch it dart out its long tongue after flies, or the little worms she got for it. When I had been some time with her, a friend who had been travelling in Italy brought her back a paper-weight with a bronze reptile upon it—chameleon or lizard I don't know which. It was from Rome, where they tell me the shops abound with them.'

'"Yes. Have you never been to Rome?"

'"Never. You know Rome well?"

'"Yes."

'"I should like to go to Rome with you."

'She spoke to me as one speaks to a child, careless as to how one's words may move it, and then went on:

'"Never mind Rome now. At all events, they sell paper-weight lizards at Rome, and my friend's travelled friend brought her home such an one, remembering how she loved her little beast. It was beautifully modelled, and quite the size of a real one; and some stranger, who called on us soon after, assured us (whether rightly or wrongly I don't know) that it *was* a real one, over which molten lead had been poured."

'"How very horrible!"

'"Is it?" she said, lightly. I suppose so, I don't know. It interested me, and I longed to try the experiment on my old friend's chameleon. I had no molten lead, but I had seen things glazed with some sort of sugar-stuff, which was poured over them scalding hot, and then hardened, remaining transparent like glass. *I got some, and poured it over the chameleon while he was asleep.*"

'I stopped rowing, my lips parted with disgust. Véra laughed.

'"Go on," she said. "I hate the boat to sway.

Listen: the chameleon did not petrify nicely in the hot melted sugar, but he did die of it, and my friend was very grieved. I had not meant to grieve her—be quite sure of that—only I did not understand. She was a kind old woman, though, and, as a gentle reproof to me, she had him set in crystal and jewelled prettily, and gave him to me as a keepsake See," she added, detaching him again, "he has '*Véra, be merciful,*' engraved underneath him. Is he not nice?"

'"And you wear him to remind you?" I said.

'"I wear him because he is a quaint ornament, that is all," she replied, looking frankly at me in the moonlight. "Poor fellow! I killed him, you see, but after all he serves best as a bracelet. He is getting rather shabby now I want another. *I wonder whether you could get me a chameleon.*"

'I suppose I ought to have hated her, but instead a feeling of extraordinary pity crept over me. This woman with me here in the boat, so beautiful and young, had she no tenderness in her nature, no remorse? I could have cried for her. I remained a few moments without speaking. What was there o say?

'Presently she went on: "It is droll, since I

have known you, I have felt now and then a sort of sorrow for having done that, and other things?"

'"What other things?"

'"Oh, I forget," she replied; "only you are so compassionate: you make me feel that I am horrible, that I do horrible things: I find that in your eyes I am like the woman one reads of, who kept her feet warm by the vitality of pigeons, killed for the purpose, pair by pair. I am like that woman, but the difference is that my feet are not cold."

'"Well," I answered, "you don't need the pigeons then."

'"No; but I want them, or something like them; look at this cloak of mine."

'"I have been looking at it; I never saw anything so soft and rich."

'"No? Do you know what it is? It is of eagles' feathers—the down of their breasts." She passed her white hands over it. I rested on my oars—for we were calmly afloat now upon deep clear water without a ripple—and listened to her voice.

'"I once had a pretty screen brought me from Niagara," she said. "I hardly looked at it, and liked other things quite as well, until someone chanced

to tell me it was of eagles' feathers, and spoke about the wantonness of destroying so kingly a bird for a woman's lap. Somehow—you see I don't better things when I tell them to you—directly I heard it was cruel, I wanted eagles' feathers, and I never rested till I got this cloak of them. I liked to think of the birds soaring up in their strength, dark against the sun, and of the sudden shot that brought them down to the hands of my little band below, for it was quite an expedition organised for me. These are the rarest eagles' feathers, and of those that form the trimming there are only a very few that come from each bird. I am in quite an eyrie!" She wrapped the cloak about her and smiled.

'I was silent still: I could not tell her what I felt. It was all sorrowful and like pain to me.

'"I am not proud with you," she said. "I want you to see me as I am—I don't know why—you make me restless: you are doing all you can to help me, I know, and I am a good pupil, am I not?"

'"Indeed you are," I answered honestly, thinking of the talent and patience that her work exhibited. "You will soon know all that I can teach you of painting clouds and mountains."

'"Shall I?" She sighed, and then went on, as

with a sudden burst of confidence: "Yes, you do help me much, but I want you to help me more. I want to have your sensitiveness, your pride, your ambition, your compassion—all. I want somehow to be you—this you withhold."

'I laughed, while all the time I felt an awakening in my pulses. "I withhold nothing," I said.

'She was quite silent, only she bared her arm and dipped her jewelled hand in the lake, looking down.

'"You will get cold," I said, mastering my longing to say something quite different, and my voice sounded harsh to my own ears. I could control my words, but my tone betrayed me. In an instant the spell was broken.

'"Let us row home," she said, "but don't say 'you will get cold.' I never get cold. I am never ill now. I used to be ill once. Now my life seems doubled. I seem to have twice the strength of any other woman. If you could give me your soul and I could give you my strength . . ." she said.

'I rowed hard, but dared say nothing. We came near the shore; then I paused, all aglow with exercise and the fever that her calm voice brought to me.

'"I am strong enough," I said. "I want no bargains, take what I can give."

I rose, to draw the boat to shore. Then she lifted up her eyes to mine.

'She was leaning back in the seat, the eagles' feathers drifting round her, the chameleon flashing from among them on her bare arm, diamond-bright.

'Then she said, almost humbly, in a low voice, but cold and unmoved: "Do you think that you could love me?"

'I do not know what I did or what I said: only somehow or other I was close to her. She drew back for an instant, but I felt her hand in mine, cold like death's hand, from the lake water. I thought all of a sudden of the little bridge at Luzern and the Dance of Death.

'It was as if death were come to me instead of love.

'We stood on shore. She was calm and almost sad; I feverish and wild. I would have drawn her to me, but she said: "It is late, put up the boat, and go home. I am going alone. I have asked a great gift of you—take time to consider it. Good-night. . . ."

'"*Do you think you could love me?*" and "*I*

have asked a great gift of you." That was what she said, and there was no need for me to answer.

'Let me remember! She made no promise, spoke no word of recompense; only rather wearily just laid her hand in mine; and the hand was like Death's, not Love's.

'Does she love me then? I cannot tell if she can love; she has no heart for others, perhaps she has none for me. Only I think that if at last—when all her other boons are given her—there might be given her a human heart, she would love me then. Oh! I would give her all my heart to love with, were it not that then there would be no *me* left to love.

'Meanwhile a sleep oppresses me since writing this, and the night is turned chiller. It is nearly dawn; let me rest . . .'

CHAPTER VII.

'*Beau Rivage, Ouchy.*—We are still here; my life going on in love, and rounded to such ripeness that I can dare foresee no future that is not a falling off. The Count is nearly well! He is a younger man than I thought, now that he has resumed activity, and hardly past middle age; but he looks to have lived his life, and his brow is marked with lines that seem rather to have come from pain and sorrow than from any studious labour. He lets us go our own way, and says little, occupying himself with his paper or his cigar, and driving a great deal.

'We do go our own way—Véra's way, that is, for I have no way that is not hers—but more as friends than as lovers. Since that night when I became hers we have said nothing of love.

'We met the next morning, as usual. She was rather pale and serious, but looked to have slept

well. I suppose I showed traces of excitement and fatigue, for she did not prolong her lesson to its usual length, and that day the Count was able for the first time to be with us while we worked. Thus there was a seal put upon our converse of the preceding night, which we did not remove at once, gradually allowing it to drop in a manner which seems odd to me now I write about it, though it did not seem unnatural then. I suppose she wished it to be set aside, and that was enough. What she has never set aside is the entire intimacy of our society, which is quite unhindered.

'The gorgons have pursued us here. We see them now and then at the public table, but they perceive no change in our attitude towards each other. The mother-gorgon has, however, more than once observed to me that she thinks I "look as if I wanted bracing," not knowing all the bright airs from new-found altitudes that are blowing about me.

'Véra is capricious still, but less so than I found her at first, though I do not think that early judgment of her was an incorrect one at the time, for I get strange glimpses into her childish life,

which must have been wilful beyond all fancy. Her father. died before she was born, her mother in giving her birth. "*I am made*," she says, "*not of two lives only, but of two deaths.*" Her mother is buried in the south of France, and Véra's first recollection is of the scent of flowers upon her grave, where she was taken to play; so that white lilacs and hyacinths and the scented daphne perfumed all her childish dreams, and these have remained her favourites—the strong-smelling blossoms of which funeral wreaths are woven.

'Little things like this I know of her childhood, scarcely anything else; but there are such gleams of its devilries that I catch now and then, as make me find it hard to put her into any relationship to the Count, who is evidently a man of strong will and strong passions, but of the most ordinary spiritual qualities.

'Just before we left Luzern, for instance, we went up into the quaint cathedral church that lies—or rather stands, for it is situated on a little hill—behind the hotel. The organ was drowsily murmuring along the whitewashed interior, and whispering into the small chapels of the plain, homely building, more like an English than a Romish church, but

for the altar with its lights and decorations. I cannot speak for the thrill when I hear an organ; and when we came out and stood in the hot churchyard that surrounds the cathedral, I fell to telling Véra an impression that its music had made upon me early in life.

'"I was once," I told her, "in York Minster with several other boys of my own age. We were on a walking tour, and had entered the cathedral with assuredly no sense of reyerence. When we had explored it above ground we penetrated to the crypt, and began rambling about in the dimly-lit place, and making noises to hear the echoes. All of a sudden the whole vault began as it were to tremble, with that inward shuddering which seems to have its beginning in one's own self, and long-drawn notes of seraphic sweetness and purity crept along the hush, like living things. It was not even the organist's practising, it was just that someone who had been meddling with the organ or repairing it was essaying a few chords and scales upon it; but in an instant I became alive to the meaning of the place we were in. It was like hearing a voice from some shrine that one had concluded empty, proclaiming, 'This is none other than the house of

God;' and to this hour the solemn feeling of awe that came upon me there, haunts me whenever I hear so much as a note of organ music."

'"Alas!" said Vera, "with me it was quite different. Although I now begin to know—through you—what it is that the organ says to us, when I was a child it only gave me an extreme disgust."

'She smiled a comical little half-smile as she went on, which I could not but feel reflected on my own lips as I heard her narrative. "You must know," she said, "that part of my impish infancy was passed at a sort of pseudo-convent in an English country town, where some nuns had settled. They were poor French nuns, and in the hope of being able by-and-by to build themselves a suitable home, they were renting a mere house with a small enclosed garden, and collecting funds by admitting ladies to board with them as well as by taking pupils. The nuns were very good and very hard-working—the ladies very flippant and very idle. Some of them would have tea-parties, and the nuns in their blue and white dresses would have to wait upon them. I was always at these tea-parties, and so got to lose what respect I might have had for the sisters had they not been thus

employed—from seeing them at a disadvantage. How dismal I should think those tea-parties now! How lively I thought them then, and how gladly I showed off my small musical gifts!—for I was past fifteen, and so far painstaking with my music in those days that I played the organ in the chapel."

'"They had a chapel, then?" I asked her, amused with her story.

'"Oh! a chapel, no! All sham," she replied impatiently. "Nothing was real, *nothing has ever seemed real to me all through my life.* It was just a drawing-room with long windows down to the ground, which it was their first ambition to fill with painted glass, but they had not been able to afford it when I was there. I sent them some beautiful panes for those windows afterwards." She paused and smiled strangely. "The room was papered in hideous English white and gold, over which they stuck their little sacred pictures, and which made a background to their waxen images that would have been your purgatory to see. The lodgers ought to have had their tea-parties in that chapel; it would have been just a fit background for the talk of silly women! If I strayed into it at odd times, I felt no sort of reverence: it was different

generally when I was playing the organ. I was not cheerful then! Oh! the strangeness to a girl of that headachy droning in the thick incense clouds, especially when, looking across the genuflexions of the nuns, you saw two big windows full of lawn and fruit-blossom staring right in upon you all the long spring afternoon, and crying to you, 'Come out, come out! What are you smothering yourselves in smoke for there? And is not the birds' song out here better than all your litanies?' Oh! I have lain my head down on the key-board, and listened to those birds outside, singing in the cool air, against the priests' monotonous chant in our hot den, until I have longed to have no soul to save. I can't believe, indeed, I ever had one," she added, turning her clear sweet eyes on mine.

'"Never mind, it will come by-and-by," I replied, half in earnest, half in jest. "Meanwhile, about the nuns?"

'"About the nuns? Oh! about the nuns there was nothing to tell—they were good; it was about me—I was not good." She looked straight before her for an instant, her brows contracted as with pain; she seemed to think. "Yes, I will tell you what I did—what your organ made me do. Among the

ladies who lodged there, towards the end of my stay, was one who was very fond of amusement of any kind, and at one of these tea-parties she made a gentleman sing some very ridiculous comic song, to take the younger nuns' attention while they waited, making the tea and handing the bread and butter. They bore the ordeal but ill, having few such distractions to contend against, poor creatures, and I was in the seventh heaven! That was on a Saturday, and the next day our hostess came in to Vespers, just as I was going to play a litany. I don't know whether it was her smart bonnet or what it was that reminded me of the previous afternoon, but it occurred to me of a sudden that our litany would go to the tune of that comic song, and almost without my will I began to play it with great expression. The nuns knew the tune, of course: it was a tune that, once heard, you couldn't forget, but they utterly failed to recall where they had heard it. Never litany went so bravely, and I was nearly canonised for my adaptation. I did not say what the tune really was, and all would have gone well (though, indeed, I had no thought of that—I only did it because I could not help myself) were it not that at

her next tea-party my foolish friend would speak of this tune, and I could not resist playing it before the very man who had sung the song. I can never tell you what harm that did me!"

'She stopped again, and suddenly became very grave.

'"What harm?" I asked.

'"In the first place," she replied, coldly, "I got his friendship: and no such man's friendship is of much service to a girl of fifteen. In the second I lost the confidence of the nuns . . . ultimately I was withdrawn from the convent. But," she added, recovering herself, "even if I had known all that would follow I could not have helped myself. Your droning organ was not to be gainsaid, and it first taught me the hollowness of things. I can hear now the priest praising me for my devotional music, I can feel again the thrill of contempt with which I looked at the fervent faces and bowed heads while I meandered on with my comic song! *I cannot help these things.* If I went up to that organ I should play upon it, '*Je possède un lit assez comfortable!*' unless you were with me."

'Ah! that '*unless*,'—how it took the sting out of the whole story! . . .

'*Saturday.* . . . .—And since we have been here, even during these days of such unending happiness and content as one only gets while one is conscious of being helpful to someone, there have come to me other echoes from the Véra that I never knew, of whom my only hints were in those first days of the *Journal pour rire* and the *C'est l'Espagne*—echoes that attract me closer and closer to my lady, while they almost make my senses reel. She has a way of touching so indifferently upon right and wrong, of handling good and evil with such an equal grace, that she undoes all one's illusions, and destroys at a touch some system upon which one has been taught to think that the health of humanity depends.

'To-night I have felt this terribly, and the foolish sadness that it induces—for of course it was only play—is upon me still.

'The rain has come upon us the last day or two, in a series of storms—not ungrateful in this July heat—which have prevented our usual expeditions, and set us to find new shifts for occupying our time indoors.

'This evening was sultry, and we were prepared to go upon the lake, when a fresh storm gathered, and

I found myself in a small apartment off the larger *salon* here, alone with Véra. It was empty, for the hotel is not yet full, and what people there are in the public rooms were listening to some music, banged out of the piano by an errant Pole who is said to possess "the secret of Chopin." If he does possess it, he certainly keeps it, and gives us no taste of its quality. *Sturm und Drang*—So we sat down and watched the lightning from a window.

'There was a table against it, with a drawer half open, and in the drawer was a pack of cards. I don't know whose it was, or whether one may play cards in that room; but these are not questions which it would ever occur to Véra to ask anywhere. She took out the cards, and began to shuffle them at random.

'She made a very striking picture, sitting there in her black lace wraps, her vivid head illumined now and again by the forked lightning, which made the gems on her fingers and the crystal chameleon on her arm flash forth like diamond eyes. And the low roll of the thunder among the lakeside mountains, and afterwards the rush of rain, that blew cool airs about us where we sat, were a strange accompaniment to her trivial leisure.

She sat at the table in the window, upright and fair. I leaned among the curtains opposite, and watched her.

"Are you a gambler?" she said, asking it in much the tone in which another woman would ask if you played billiards.

'I hate her to ask such questions, they always make me doubly deprecate a thing; and I answered that I was a fool at all card-playing, and had never in my life played anything but round games or whist.

'She looked at me questioningly for a moment, and rather sadly, as if perceiving she had vexed me somehow, and wishful to see how; and when she saw that it was on her own account that I was vexed, her eyes grew larger as with tears, but she smiled.

"I will teach you to play *écarté*," she said.

'We had neither of us much money in our pockets. She was wearing an ornamental purse that contained a few francs—something less than a napoleon—and I had about as much in my waistcoat.

'We played for five-franc pieces, and at first of course she won. By-and-by I entered into

the game; her excitement began to communicate itself to me, while my listlessness betook itself to her, and the luck changed; I began to win, and in half an hour I had won her money.

'The storm went on overhead, and we decided to continue our game, but she had nothing to stake.

'"What of mine could you wear, if you won it?" she asked me.

'"Let us play for love," I answered, feeling my eyes burn as I spoke. She laughed.

'"No, that is not amusing; look, you could wear this on your watch-chain." She unfastened a little jewelled heart from a bunch of ornaments at her waist. I took it up.

"Tell me about it," I said.

'"I believe it was my mother's," she answered; "and that it holds her hair; but it is old-fashioned now." She said it in much the same tone she had used when speaking of the chameleon—a tone of absolutely sincere indifference.

'I put it down, and could not repress a sigh. I staked all my winnings against it. I wished I might not win it, but I did. She became impatient.

'"One more," she said. I staked the heart again, and all my money.

'She looked at it and shrugged her shoulders. "I have nothing worth so little; or, stay," and she took out a pearl pin that fastened the black laces about her head.

'"Tell me about that too," I said, "in case it should be mine."

'"It is the Count's," she said, and laughed; "but he will forgive me!"

'I wished not to play, but she insisted, and dealt again. I was angry with her, first for her heartlessness, and then for her dishonesty, although I attached no real meaning to either.

'I won the pin

'"Once more," she said again, "that I may get them back." She looked interested, flushed rather with amusement than with disappointment.

'"What will you stake?" I said.

'She smiled. "I shall not tell you."

'"Is it worth all this?" I asked, throwing down the pin and the locket and the little heap of money.

'She looked at it critically, and then bit her upper lip an instant, and smiled again, "I think so.'

'We dealt again for the last time. She played as usual, neither carelessly nor eagerly, but the cards were dead against her, and she lost.

Then she let the laces fall from about her head, put her arms up behind it, leaned backward, and laughed outright.

'There was something in her laugh that startled me. I looked at her and tried to smile, but I could not. I felt an irresistible impulse to implore her not to speak.

'"Well," she said, "you've won my stake."

'"Yes," I answered her, my lips dry under this strange impulse.

'"And you want to know what it was?" She leaned forward now and raised her eyes to mine: the lightning flashed across her, and made a lurid smile upon her jewels and her beauty.

'"Yes; what was it?"

'"*Myself!*"

'I do not know how I looked at her, but I saw her half rise as in fear, and the mocking glance on her face change to a look of sorrow and surprise. Then I got out somehow or other into the verandah, and sat down hiding my head in my hands. It seemed more than I could bear: I thought my heart would break. I felt tears coming: for the first time for I know not how many years I cried like a little child.

'The storm ceased. She came out bareheaded into the rain and stood by me. She did not speak at once, but I felt that she was trembling. She had the money and the trinkets in her hand.

'"Take these things," she said, presently. "Why are you angry with me? I meant nothing."

'I could not speak, I felt ashamed even to stir. Half tenderly half roughly she pulled my hand from before my face and thrust her own into it with the accursed things: then she drew her hand away, wet with my tears.

'She went back into the room on her way upstairs, and paused under the gaslight.

'I had never loved her with such pain.

'I turned and looked at her.

'She was standing in the light and holding up her hand; then she stooped her lips to it and kissed it, over and over again.

'I let fall the trinkets: something seemed to have passed from me to her: I felt it was she, not I, that had won. What if these foolish little treasures are mine? Are not my tears, shed out of deep heart's trouble for "the pity of it," upon her hand and upon her lips—upon her touch and upon her kisses—for ever?'

As I finished reading these words, I was roused by hearing a carriage at the door. Someone was admitted without a moment's hesitation. I rose with an instinct that something was wrong, but remembered that Clifford had not seen a doctor during the day, and I knew he was under medical treatment.

I looked at his watch.

The hour was not late, and doubtless it was the doctor who had come to see him. As no one summoned me, I stirred the fire and resumed my reading.

CHAPTER VIII.

'*Basle. August* —.—The Count has recovered as by a miracle, and his languor has passed with the return of his health; he has got back his old activity, and for the last fortnight we have been on the move again.

'We arrived here a week ago, and have put up at the "Three Kings," a favourite inn of Véra's, and where the Count is well known. We have beautiful rooms, every one of them looking out upon the Rhine; and the rapid river has a strange effect upon my brain when I gaze, as my wont is, out of my window morning and night.

'It is as if it were running away with my life.

'It swirls and tosses about beneath our stone balconies, but always with the same vigorous thrusting away from us—I cannot describe it—irresistible, elusive. I sit down again after watching it, with the feeling that I have walked miles—out of breath and tired:

not all the fresh winds that it bears along upon its tide have any power to refresh me.

'With Véra it is otherwise: she revels in it. She will stand out in the balcony with her hands upon the stone parapet, and her lithe body poised on tip-toe, her hair and her sleeves blown back, her arms bare; and laugh in the face of the breeze. "It blows me all kinds of things," she says, "besides occasional nasty suggestions." And the Count gets good from it too. He is a man who does not mind nasty suggestions; a man—now he is in health again—of appetite rather than refinement. I think he likes me, but it is with a sort of liking that I could well spare: for it never occurs to him that I love Véra, or if it does he is only amused by the thought, counting such love an empty tribute to her beauty. While I can never be grateful enough to him, too, for the opportunities that he allows us of being together, I am loth to think that he would let any stranger have equal access to her with me. I should like my lady to be hedged about with all parental care, except when I am by, as all lovers would; but parental care is not his forte. Véra is very proud, but she is full of fancies, and if she took it into her head to teach the *concierge* to draw, I think the

Count would let her, so long as it did not interfere with the *concierge* doing his bidding when he had any orders to give him.

'However, Véra has other occupations. She is anxious not only to draw, but to be an artist; she is possessed with a desire for independence—for a profession—which is as strange, in one so surrounded by every luxury, as it is laudable. I cannot but think, if she goes on working as she does now, that she will attain her aim; she allows herself no wasted moments. She is up early, and her recreation is a turn now and then upon the balcony of the room, where she works with her windows open upon the river. That is all, except that she drives with the Count in the evening, before dinner, which is ordered as late as possible, generally about half past-eight.

'By rights I should be able to work too, but I cannot. I am possessed by a feverish longing to see *her* excel—a conviction that whatever I can do she will do better by-and-by, which is against my own ambition, but which I cannot gainsay. I sit to her, and teach her what I can, nor has she yet outgrown my aid; but every now and then I find that what I am telling her as final in itself is to her

a mere suggestion; that what I propose as a principal subject she includes as accessory; that, in fine, her scope is larger than mine, and her strength surer.

'And strange to say, when the day's work is over (and daily she feels to have grasped something fresh or gained some further skill), I am only exhausted, my hand tired and my heart faint. But I give, not without hope of reward. One day it will be different, should she ever—and the vision grows—belong to me, and all the streams that I have turned into her tide become my fountain of refreshment and help.

'Herein, forasmuch as she is so gracious to me, lies my aim now; and I have this assurance at least for my behoof, that if she does not love me she loves no one else, and that her wish is that I should love her. I am so far become part of her life.

'Moreover, as I said just now, I am of use to her—being at this present moment not only her master but her model. For Vera de Trekoff is painting a portrait of her humble servitor Clifford Gray. Hour after hour her earnest eyes peruse me, hour after hour she patiently transfers my being to her canvas.

'She is painting me as I looked when we talked

together on the bridge at Luzern. We made some sketches there afterwards; so that she has *data* for the accessories, and with the river here, and the lights in at our window, we have managed to recall the lake effect sufficiently. It was a fancy of hers to paint me leaning against one of the embrasures of the bridge, underneath a panel upon which is vaguely traced the deathly figure with its German legend.

'It is a weird sort of picture—a picture that I should never have imagined myself or of myself. I do not like it; but it is full of a cleverness that holds one like a spell. Clear light and clear water, heavy wooden roofings and props, and this tall figure of me, straight before you, to which it is all background. Véra's eyes are the most unerring artist-eyes I have ever encountered; it is like suffering something to have them upon one. They travel over me as if I were a piece of wood of which she were painting the grain, till when they are set upon my lips and eyes they grow soft and dewy.

'This morning she was painting my hands, and it occurred that we fell to speak of the difficulties of representing grasp. I was standing in the window, holding a portion of the frame which

serves us as the bridge rail, when of a sudden she crossed straight over to me and took my hand in hers. There was nothing tender in the gesture; but the confidence it implied and its intimacy, would have touched even a less sensitive fellow than I am.

'I felt my arms ache to hold her as she stood before me.

'She was in her morning wrapper of creamy lace, a dress like a child's, made straight and plain, of this full light stuff, with a yellowish silk sash broad about the waist, and her unbraceleted arms and ringless hands were bare. She drew her hand over my palm as she held it.

'The morning was sultry, and she had some strongly scented roses in her waistband; perhaps that was why I felt my senses sicken so.

'I was standing with my back to the window, and the river air blew about my neck, else I verily think I should have trembled.

'She breathed slowly and regularly, as a child breathes, without stir or emotion of any kind, but she held my hand as if the touch gratified her, and looked at the joints, the fingers, the wrist, holding it in her cool clasp.

'"I never told you that I had studied the hand," she said.

'I knew something of cheiromancy myself, and told her so, and that I had but little faith in it.

'She answered me: "I too have begun to think it absurd now, although I still believe that the temperature, the shape and character, if not the lines of the hand, may teach us something. I am sure the grasp of a hand is a great index; and it is a strange thing to tell you, but I like to hold a man's hand. It gives me a feeling of added strength, and of proximity to the real working heart of the person with whom I find myself.

'"Some years ago, when as I told you I was frail and delicate, I first learnt something of this sort of fortune-telling. I was interested about it, and the lines in my own hand were so unusual, that I went to a famous man in Paris, chancing to be there about that time. He told me that he made no prophecies, but that on my palm the line of life ended when I was about three and twenty."

'"Are you three and twenty yet?"

'"I am six and twenty."

'"And therefore sceptical?"

'"No; but I was warned in time. I was ill and full of fancies, and you will be amused when I tell you my scheme to avert fate; but it has succeeded."

'"Tell me."

'"I was twenty-two when I consulted this man. As the year wore on, and I did not gain strength, I began to fear that what he had told me might come true, and the thought of it sufficed to weaken me. 'Was I to die,' I thought, 'because that little line was short?' I got up one night and took a piece of wire, and when I had heated it red hot, I seared upon my hand a deep continuation to my short line of life. When the burn healed, it left its narrow channel plainly marked. I have the best line of life in Europe now, and look! since I have been drawing, and gaining strength in body and mind, a triple band has come about my wrist. That is the best life-sign of all, and I have not burnt that."

'"I used to have that too," I answered, baring my wrist. "I noticed it at Axenstein"—but I am thinner than when I left Axenstein, and it has ceased to show.

'"I cannot see it," she said, and sighed.

'Then she went on: "I suppose I am a kind of fatalist; I cannot tell you any of my creeds, they are not formal; but I felt, when I had given myself this line of life, that I must act up to it, that I must increase my store of life. The question was how? The Count, my uncle, was the strongest and healthiest man I knew, the man with most vitality. I used to hold his hand, and I was so nervous and so fanciful then, that I could almost feel his strength coming into my fingers through the thick palm of his hand and its warm grasp." She paused again. "Anyway, whether nervous or not, I seemed to feel that it was from his life that I got well. Conceive the terror that I have felt in seeing him fail. I told you I was like the plant that grows on graves; I begin to think I am like a vampire, too—anything horrible that you will."

'We both laughed, and then I said: "But the Count's life has righted itself, he is well."

'"Yes," she replied," the Count's life has righted itself. I feel as if I drew strength, and better strength, from another source." She looked at me for the first time with infinite compassion in her eyes.

'"*You* are quite strong and well still, are you not?" she said.

I answered "Yes," and then she let go my hand and went back to her easel.

'I had to lean against the window-frame for support. Véra was refreshed, as if with air and exercise, and went on painting with renewed vigour . . . .

'What strange things we have talked about, she and I! We have never referred to that painful incident which I told in my last record here, because I have always felt since that, meaning much less than she said, she hurt me much more than she meant; but of other and like things we have talked without restraint, and I marvel to see how utterly without perception of right and wrong—without what we call moral qualities—she has been all her life. I delight to see the gradual soul awaken in her. Hitherto she has had neither instincts nor memory, nothing but beauty, physical strength, and aptitude. Now memory asserts itself, and she recalls little things out of her life, at which many would grieve, but which bring her nothing but the interest one would feel if one read of them in an imaginary creature; still, she recalls them, and next the sympathies awaken, but slowly—slowly—and the eager brain is well ahead of these as yet. As

she remembers, I forget; as she desires things, I cease to desire them; as she expands, I fail. I am sure this is no vain phantasy—quite sure that it is the real state of our dependence on each other.

'Will it be so always? It is a fluid state, not fixed: it must end one way or the other. Will she absorb all that I have to give, and shall I just cease to be? or will the recompense soon begin? Shall I ever look at the full-blown plant of my soul's creation, and transplant it and have it for my very own at life's banquet, its flowers for my chaplet, its fruits for my feasting, its savour for my wine? I am not without hope. *For Labour Love*—that has become my watchword. Would she but love me, would she but give up her vanities and rank and call me hers, my health I think would be restored to me an hundredfold. For there is no question but that, whether I am ill or well, my whole life is changed within me . . .

'The gorgons arrived here three days ago. Their pursuit of us seems to be something more than accidental, and I cannot but think that we interest them deeply. The dimpled one looks ever with increasing wonder and delight at Véra, her dresses and her beauty; the thin one ever with in-

creasing sympathy at me, my listlessness and pallor; the mother looks at both of us, and latterly with quite a different expression, the look of one who, having studied a riddle long, is hard upon the answer at last.

'Rather to our chagrin, and apparently to Véra's contempt, the mother-gorgon has at last obtained a formal introduction to Count de Trekoff, which is perhaps the reason for their following us. She is a Mrs. Chesterton—one of those women who, having at a former time in their lives known everybody, would fain in their subsequent career never allow anybody they once knew to slip away from them. The Count's position and wealth attracted her, but his ill health was a sufficient safeguard from her wiles at first. Since he is better, however, she has discovered mutual friends—friends that is of her late father and his, for the Count himself has abjured society for some years—to whom she has written about him, and who have been able to make her personally known to him and to Véra. She calls upon us frequently, and he occasionally returns her call—Véra never: and on her coming to see us, Véra at once retires to her studio, and entrenches herself behind the excuse of a lesson with

me. She is as self-willed as she is proud, and while her manner is grace itself, she does not choose, as she expresses it, "to bore herself by being interviewed."

'While she is with me in the studio during these visits she is more silent than usual, and one of the delicate eyebrows curves a little, while the upper lip occasionally twitches, as if with slight vexation I, standing opposite to her, as her model, see these tiny signs, and they make me anxious, and so increase my love, for I love her so dearly that to see the slightest room for added love about her makes me lavish it the more in my heart of hearts. . . .

'*Sunday.*—Such a visit took place to-day, the gorgon (with a flavour of Church about her) coming in the afternoon with both her daughters; the coroneted locket less prominent than at *table-d'hôte*, as worn by who should say, "To-day I am among my equals: hence with the signs of rank!" In accordance with my insular habits long retained (and tenderly *for auld lang syne*) I do not sit to Véra on Sundays; the portrait is put aside and we are mostly idle. Mrs. Chesterton may have known this, for I noticed that she smiled with an inward triumph upon finding us all together in our chief *salon* when she was announced.

'The Count was writing, Véra was at the piano, and I as usual not far off, and by good luck—as the event proved—occupied in looking over some music.

'The Count received his visitors with that extreme politeness which a tiresome person is apt to mistake for hospitality, Véra with something less than usual of her negligent grace, while I for my part, having made my bow, put up the music and prepared to leave the room.

'"Do not go," said Véra hastily, as she left the piano, and crossed the large room to shake hands with the gorgons; so I remained and watched the interview from my post of vantage near the window.

'It was like a scene in a play. I did not enter into it because I knew that Mrs. Chesterton did not want me, and that the eldest daughter did, and I was too sulky for the one's rebuffs and too lazy for the other's smiles. The *eminency* which I had to deprecate when these ladies first accosted me has quite passed from my name, I suppose since they discovered that I give Véra lessons, which it might be inconsistent of an "eminent artist" to find time to do. In her eyes at first I was a ladder to

the loft where this rooster had set her hopes; and she eyed me with favour. Afterwards, when she had soared legitimately into the loft by less material means, she could crow contempt upon me from her perch.

'I was indifferent, so long as my head rested there too!

'And thus it came about that I seldom spoke to her unless to answer inquiries after the Count, at a chance meeting, on the stairs or in the hall.

'The afternoon was very hot, with that pitched summer sunlight that for some hours seems unvarying, and that gives one the impression of the day just hanging still and burning, without decrease of heat or growth of shade. Even more than my wonted languor was upon me, as I leaned between the curtains and the window, with one ear turned to the swirl of the river, and the other listening to the foolish talk of our visitors.

'"*Life is hurrying on,*" the river cries: "*All these splashes and twists that I make are time's counting; these foam sheets are hours, these bubbles moments. Work! live! this minute cannot come again, the next is yours—no, not the next either, the next is now the last—it is come—and gone.*"

'"Quite, quite too terrible," drawls the faded schemer, "this want of *âmes de connaissance*. Except yourselves, we know nobody; there is nobody one *can* know; and my dear daughters do not occupy themselves as your niece does."

'"Do they not draw?" says the Count.

'"Charmingly." (She would have said "charmingly," if he had asked her if they stood on their heads.) "Lavinia is quite—quite—an artist, but she neglects her painting here." A sigh, while I felt Lavinia looking towards my right ear (all she could see of me), and fidgeting me into a fever. "You see she has not all the *appliances* that Mlle. de Trekoff can afford." (I suppose I am one of those appliances: one must be in a state of indifference, indeed, to endure being alluded to as a chattel. I turn my head towards the gorgon; she goes on.) "Ah! Mr. Gray, you are interested no doubt in my sweet girl's talent: perhaps some day she will show you something of hers in Park Street." (They have rooms in Park Street for the spring season till Easter. The drawings and other paraphernalia for conquest have no doubt been warehoused now at the Pantechnicon for a few shillings a week, while the rooms were let at a higher rate than they could afford.)

"We go back to town later on: people overcrowd London so in the summer, that one never knows whom one meets. I always say 'Give me London in the autumn, when there's nobody there but a few town lovers like myself.' Don't I, Lavinia? don't I, Mary?".

'Evidently the thin one is Lavinia and the dimpled one Mary. I look at them, to fit their names upon them. They are certainly ladies, those girls. Plain and poorly dressed, they have a mild assurance about them which is never acquired. They are neither as much fool nor as much knave as their mother; and she is not without distinction herself, when you look at her without the bias in your mind of just wishing her at the bottom of the Rhine.

'Véra is dressed in a rather richer gown than usual, or it strikes me so. I wish she were not.

'And she is looking more ostentatiously beautiful than usual. I wish she were not.

'Her extreme loveliness and vigour, as she sits straight in the sunlight, with her bare arms crossed, strike too loud a note in this group of worn and ill-clad gentlewomen, though, God knows, I would not wish her ill-clad or worn.

'The Count, without his will, falls into their tone. I don't know how, but I note it as an artist. Véra does not: she is "out of it"—hating it—bored. They begin to talk of the advent of "possible people:" the Count even shows some faint signs of interest. Véra only sits like a beautiful doll, and looks at the girls opposite to her: there is something daunting in her looks, but these girls are not daunted.

'"We want so much to see your painting," says Lavinia. She would speak in the same tone to princess or peasant.

'Véra stares at her, but the stare is ineffective.

'"Mr. Gray will show you what you wish to see," she answers.

'And then she turns to me with her charming smile. "Go," she says; and there is something caressing in her action, which I could almost wish away, I am become so critical. "Go and fetch those flower studies of mine, and something of your own work, *that* will interest Miss Chesterton more." She proposes no adjournment to the studio, she says nothing of the portrait.

'Is she afraid of them?

'Then she crosses to where I was sitting. "I will go on sorting that music," she says, availing

herself of my half-finished occupation, "if Miss Chesterton will excuse me."

'Her manner is unnecessarily stiff. Miss Chesterton notices it, but not with surprise; rather, I cannot help thinking, with amusement, and she exchanges looks with her mother.

'The mother-gorgon, when I return with the portfolios, has pursued Véra to the music stand, and is looking at her in the full light, standing herself, as an English lady carefully does as a rule, with her back to the light. I resent the inquisition of that gaze, and it is as much as I can do to show the drawings patiently to Lavinia and Mary, whose comments are dull enough and well-bred enough to stimulate rather than to stay my inattention. Even the comments cease at last, and I wake to the fact that we are all, including the Count, contemplating the scene between Mrs. Chesterton and Véra. The Count's glance is a queer mixture of vexation, approval, and interest. We are all acting. He is pretending to talk to Miss Mary, I am pretending to show Miss Lavinia a drawing, Mrs. Chesterton is pretending to admire some plaiting of Mlle. de Trekoff's beautiful dress. Véra alone is pretending nothing.

'She is making as it were an indignant display of herself which seems quite uncalled for. She stands in the light, and it searches her, finding no flaw in her exuberant loveliness, but accentuating here and there queer little touches of individuality—the powder on the hair, the delicate line beneath the eyes, the touch of red upon the lips, which to her are no more than the finish of her costume, but into which the gorgon's practised gaze seems to be staring a new significance. For the first time since I have known her, I, too, am critical upon the score of her appearance, although, perhaps, in one sense her beauty has never shown to such advantage.

'There is an electric current of secret thought in the room—of which my languor and drowsiness make me sensitive and aware—between the Count and Mrs. Chesterton, between Mrs. Chesterton and her daughters, between her daughters and Véra, between Véra and me: the visit is not comfortable.

'"How fond you seem of Offenbach's music, and Lecocq's!" says Mrs. Chesterton, scanning the pile with which Véra's fingers are busy.

'"Yes; I am not musician enough for the greater composers," she answers, "and I like to be amused."

'"Ah! so much depends upon early training."

'Véra looks at her rather haughtily. "Music is a later acquisition of mine," she says; "my education was rather neglected."

'"Ah! indeed, owing perhaps to your dear uncle's delicate health?"

'"Owing, I think, to my own disinclination," she replies.

'"You had no parents, then?" says Mrs. Chesterton, supplementing the microscope of her gaze with an eyeglass, like an added lens.

'"I had a father and a mother," replies Véra, with a rather satirical smile, "but I was spared their interference with my will. I never saw either of them that I know of: a Providence removed them."

'"Dear, dear, how sad! And your father—the Count's brother—his younger brother?"

'Véra makes no answer, but turns the leaves of the music.

'"His elder brother?"

'"My eldest brother," says the Count, from his sofa.

'"Ah! dear, dear—died before you were born? how sad!'

'"Was it sad?" says Véra, with an ironical smile. "I'm like a riddle, am I not?"

'"You *are indeed*," says Mrs. Chesterton, with some intention in her tone.

'Véra calls me. "Come here," she says, her eyes still laughing. "I want to show Mrs. Chesterton something, and you must turn over."

'I cross to her reluctantly, she has evidently been baited into doing something preposterous. She takes some music from the score of a comic opera, tears it impatiently out of the bound volume, and sits down with it at the piano.

'"This is something of my state," she says; and sings some airy couplets from a rather *risque* song, as to the boon and blessing of being parentless.

'Mrs. Chesterton becomes stony, she fails utterly to see the humour of it. "Very funny," she says, with a frigid smile, "and sung with such spirit!"

'I look towards Lavi ia and Mary; they, too, are gazing stonily at the drawings. The Count alone applauds; then they, too, smile frigidly.

'Véra having played a few loud chords, looks at me, and her eyes are troubled again. I stoop over her to remove the music.

'"Have I hurt you?" she says.

'I do not answer.

'Presently the gorgons take their leave; then she bursts out at once, running to the door as their steps are heard descending the staircase decorously and leisurely, and locking it with a gesture of intolerance.

'"Horrible people!" she says. "Let us go from this hotel: they bore me, they waste my time. Why do they come staring and troubling us? we do not want them."

'The Count has resumed his writing. He shrugs his shoulders and lifts his eyebrows; I am left, silent and astonished, to bear the brunt of Véra's anger.

'"You were not nice to them," I say, reproachfully.

'"Nice to them!" she answers, with contempt. "Have you no instinct of what you want and of what you don't want. If not, yours will be a wasted life. I don't want these people; they are odious and absurd; and they are hideous too."

'"They are poor," I answer her, pleading against her cruel truthfulness; "and they want you; you can be of service to them."

"'No, I can't," she goes on in a softer voice. "I have not time for them, my life is going to crowd out all such people. . . . Want me? not they. They want to say they know me; they want to pick holes in my manners and take the pattern of my sleeves. Let them talk to the *garçons* here and give my maid a napoleon. Surely you, stupid," she adds, turning to the Count, "do not think it is to amuse you that they come."

"'No, Véra," he answers, without looking up. "I don't think that."

"'They are piecing us together," she goes on. "They want to see how I belong to you, that if they have the key to one of us, they may be able to unlock us both, and I puzzle them: you don't; you are stupid, I repeat."

"'*Am I stupid?*" he answers, just looking up at her. There is something new to me in his look —dangerous, hateful.

She laughs.

"'And you," she says, more gently to me, "you are silly; you bore yourself with these misses; you are shy with the old *momie*; and you hurt yourself with me. Why did we not all get up and dance at them—do something outrageous? I tried to; but

you are conventional, reverent, you do not understand how to live. I do. He shall not return their call."

'I went out upon the balcony, my heart full—I could not tell why—at her untenderness and want of tact.

'She came out to me, and we stood silent, looking down upon the full river together.

'"This teaches us not to waste our time," she says: "*it would make short work of those old women.*"

'It was just what I was thinking, only so differently put, that I could not repress a smile.

'Véra leaned herself over the balcony. "Just look at it," she said; "all the sticks and straws, and all the bad smells and rottenness that it carries on with it; they don't make any difference. So long as people want a sign of beauty and a comparison of purity they will quote the Rhine river; so long as they want refreshment they will go down and bathe in it, and it will be none the worse for the dead cats and offal. I am like that river," she went on, impatiently. "There are a hundred things upon me and about me that *don't matter*; they would encumber me if I let them, but I throw them off,

I go on. It is heaven's rain and earth's lake water that add to me, not the dirt of towns and the mud of banks."

'I did not answer her simile; I only looked down upon the river, and felt the old feeling upon me, that it was running away with my life, stronger than ever on this summer afternoon,

'"You are like the lake," she said, laughing, and looking at me.

'"And the Count?"

'"Oh! the Count is like the towns."

'"Why am I like the towns?" asked the Count, coming out to us in our stillness upon the balcony.

'Véra leaned back and gave him both her hands, putting them behind her, and drawing him towards her so.

'"You are like the towns, *mon cher*," she said, "because you build me beautiful quays, and teach me useful works. I am the river Rhine, *bien entendu*, and I have a great deal to thank you for, I suppose."

'"The town's thanks to the river," he said, gracefully.

'"Of course! that relieves me much; no one would think of the river's thanking the town.

Think of all the horrible things the town teaches the river." She looked back at him, and he smiled that same smile again. "What the river thanks is the lake and the rain," she added, to me, with a new and tender touch in her voice. "The river is no good to the lake or the rain; it goes on its way, perhaps to some big lake, perhaps to the sea, but fed always by the wayside lakes or the rain."

'Neither of us spoke, but Véra's eyes turned now from the Count's to mine, and their gaze became humid and sweet. The moment seemed like an hour. She lay back against the Count's breast, and with her hands in his, the sun pouring down upon her beauty and articulating it, while her eyes dwelt on mine. The Count stooped over her with that curious smile of his. I stood just apart from them, riveted by her gaze and the tender parting of her lips as she looked at me, and it was as if my heart ceased beating for an instant. Then I turned and went into the big room again, which was dark and cool in contrast to that burning sunlight on the balcony. The stillness carried in their voices, as it had perhaps carried ours to the Count.

'"That youngster is in love with you, Véra," I heard him say in French. She did not answer

at once, but played with his hands as she held them.

'Then I heard her say quickly: "Well, I wish it, and you should wish it too."

'"Do you like him?"

'"Yes."

'"Love him?" with a laugh.

'I could not bear to wait and hear the answer. I sat down by the piano, where I was standing, and began playing something—anything. It was her favourite *Chanson de Fortunio* that my fingers began to find. I do not think she had even time to answer him before I played the first notes, for I saw her blonde head turn towards me, and then her clear voice was borne in on the warm perfumed air, singing, "*Si vous croyez que je vais dire. . . .*"

'He put his lips to her forehead, and she came into the room, composed and fair, just as the carriage was announced.'

CHAPTER IX.

'*Wednesday.*—In the quiet workaday life that we lead here—Véra and I—the continual *va-et-vient* of the hotel is almost a matter of indifference to us. We sometimes spy a very monstrous something that I regret to say is nearly always English, or a very attractive something that is generally American, and then perhaps we dine down in the public room and amuse ourselves with watching it. Like Mrs. Chesterton, we do not as a rule find it "possible," and we go back to our studio.

'But yesterday there arrived here a young German Prince, not a reigning prince, but with an old title and vast estates, about whom Véra has been rather occupied. He is Prinz Ernst von Helmstadt, on his travels with a tutor whom he has outgrown, and a cosmopolitan friend or two, one of whom is Lord Charles Carlton, the Duke of Durham's second son, "about the worst companion

one could find him," as Mrs. Chesterton trenchantly put it when she waylaid the Count on the stairs to tell him about the new comers. The Count remembers Prinz Ernst as a boy (he is a boy still, for the matter of that, despite some two years at Oxford, where one of the younger Carltons was his boon companion), and is in anticipation of a call from him before he leaves. Véra has already seen him in the hall as she returned from her afternoon drive, although he escaped the Count's careless gaze. She recognises him as a being that may just possibly enter into her horizon, and anticipates that the visit will not be delayed beyond to-morrow.

'I wish I could describe my feelings about it all, or, indeed, describe in any way what I have felt about Véra since last Sunday, of anger, of intolerance, of jealousy.

'I suppose I am ill from this burning heat, under which she thrives like an exotic in the sunlight. I cannot sleep or eat, I can only watch her and try to guide her; and assuredly she makes progress—so much progress that, to use her metaphor of the lake and river, I feel she has almost exhausted me. If only she would leave

in my emptiness something else than the sticks and straw! . . . But I do not despair.

'We sat talking on the balcony this evening, she and I, and it has been, I feel, a crisis in my life.

'The Count was strong enough to dine with some old friends at a *château* in the neighbourhood, and left me with Véra much as he would leave a dog or a toy. For once she has been over tender, over kind. . . .

'We did not dine together; but after dinner—during which I had an opportunity of observing the new comers, who were dining in a group at a table apart, while I took (or pretended to take) my food—I went upstairs by her uncle's request to sit with her.

'I dressed myself in evening clothes, which I have not hitherto done—for the Count's sake, who has been too much an invalid to make a toilet at present—and when I was refreshed with cold water, and brushed and smoothed into sleekness, I knocked at the door of her *salon* with a pleasantly new sensation upon me—in the cool fresh dusk of the evening—as if I were going to visit a stranger whom I knew beforehand that I loved.

'For form's sake I tapped, and entered.

'She, too, had taken unusual pains with her dress, or so at first I thought. I have never seen her so beautiful as she looked then—as she looks now I suppose, for it is only three hours ago. . . .

'The large room was nearly dark in the nine-o'clock twilight, but on a pedestal between the windows shone the little silver lamp she had been carrying when I first saw her. The casements were wide open, for Véra has a horror of the lingering scent of dinner, and on the same pedestal with the lamp were burning some Chinese tapers or 'joss sticks,' of which she is fond, and which have a pungent aromatic scent.

'She had seated herself on a heap of cushions, which form part of her own luggage and which were piled in one of the windows, just within reach of the lamplight. She was dressed in a pure white *cachemere* robe, open at the throat and wrists, trimmed with lace and swan's down fur, and she had her usual bouquet on one shoulder, fastened by a brooch in which there burnt a large sapphire.

'As I came towards her she half raised herself on her elbow and held out her hand.

'"How pretty you are to-night," she said, "in your black and white—like a prayer-book!"

'Somehow I felt that this evening there was to be no hindrance to our truth-telling. "I am indeed a book of prayers," I said, as I came and stood in the window opposite to her, and looked down upon her beauty, and listened to the river.

'The moon came up, and there were all sorts of lights and shadows on the swirling flood.

'Véra looked at me. "What is your collect for to-day, my prayer-book?" she said.

'"Evening prayer, *Lighten my darkness*," I answered her, and sank down upon some more of the many silken cushions with which she had bespread her balcony.

'There were sounds and lights upon the river. Up here in our stone corner it was very still and dark; I felt it somehow sacred, being there alone with my lady.

'"Shall we play *écarté* again?" she asked me suddenly.

'I sighed. "I wish you wouldn't say those things," I said. "Can't you understand that they are dreadful?"

'"Yes. I begin to understand it; I begin to understand a great many things besides drawing, since I have known you; all sorts of sympathies

and gentlenesses. My only fear is that they may get in my way, and I will not let them master me."

'"Do you care about me at all?"

'My tone must have been diffident enough, for she laughed. "I never think about that," she said. 'You seem to belong to me, to have given yourself—it is your own phrase—to me. I am half sorry for you because of me, and wholly glad of myself because of you. Yes! I suppose I care for you. I would not let anyone or anything take you from me."

'"That is not enough," I said, looking up at her from where I lay, and my glance seemed to break itself into tenderness in her own eyes.

'She stooped towards me, and took my head in her hands. "My poor friend," she said, "what good would it be to you that I should love you?" There was a note of sadness in her voice.

'"Every good," I answered her.

'"I don't know that—you don't know that," she said. "You had better love Lavinia Chesterton!"

'"Do you despise me, then?" I asked her.

'"Indeed, no: I admire you," she replied, her hands playing lightly with my hair. "I think you are very good, and very, very clever, and very, very,

very handsome; and there's no higher praise to a young man."

'I half shrank from her, she spoke so mockingly, and her touch, tender and unwonted as it was, seemed all of a sudden to be too possessive not to be contemptuous. I took her hands, and held them fast and hard in mine.

'"I like that," she said. "I told you I liked that: it seems to me as if I could feel your life comir into mine through your palms . . . but it is absurd, one would think we were turning each other in a dance." And then after a pause, "Tell me, has any woman ever loved you yet?"

'"I do not know," I said. "I don't care, and you do not care either."

'"But tell me!"

"Oh! my landlady's daughter in Florence—she idolises me. She is fifteen next winter."

'"Bah! Who else?"

'"My mother's maid. She is forty-five, and an Italian, too, by the way. Evidently I appeal to an Italian temperament."

'"Oh! like that," she said. "I could love you like that—I don't call that loving."

'"But *could* you love me like that?"

'"Yes; I think I do."

'There was silence between us for some moments. Always she makes these admissions carelessly, as if it were not worth while making them: I can take them for nothing.

'"Tell me about these strangers," she said.

'Well, I answered her, almost glad that the strain which should have made me too happy was for the moment ended. "Prinz Ernst is charming: he has frank blue eyes, and a pleasant stupid young German face. He hasn't much brains, but he has plenty of passions. I can tell it by his lips and the way he bites them. He is manly looking, and though I have not spoken to him I like him. I should think he was very susceptible."

'"And Lord Charles?"

'"Lord Charles I don't like; he is rather sinister, although he seems amusing enough; dark, and he looks as if he had a liver. He has thin lips, not a bit like Prinz Ernst's, which are full and sweet, but he bites them too, and they pull to one side when he smiles as if it hurt him."

'She laughed. "That is true."

'"How do you know?"

'"I know Lord Charles Carlton a little. Don't

you remember my telling you about my playing the tune of a comic song at the poor nuns' afternoon litany, and about the man who had sung it?"

'"Yes."

'"That man was Charles Carlton!"

'"But he was a friend of yours?"

'"Yes! but that is quite ten years ago."

'She spoke—not indeed with regret, but dreamily, as if trying to recall something to her mind, and her eyes had a strange wistfulness in them as they looked into mine.

'"Tell me," I said.

'After a long pause she answered: "I don't know, I don't remember; one outgrows things so completely. I only know he was the man who sang the comic song, and I recollect that it was a song which would not have been appreciated if he had not been a duke's son. They thought he was singing it for the nuns' edification, but no! he was singing it for mine. I don't suppose he would recognise me now," she added, musingly. "We shall see! I have a curiosity about him."

'"But he would know your name?"

'"No! he wouldn't. I had a little name among the sisters, and it was only by that that

his friend who was lodging there might introduce me."

'She was silent again, her hands caressing mine. I felt as if I were in a dream as I watched her, with that same look as of trying to remember something still upon her face.

'"I shall like to see Charles Carlton again," she said.

'"But this evening is mine," I answered.

'"Yes," she said; "this evening is yours; shall I sadden it or gladden it for you—Clifford?"

'It was the first time she had called me by my name, and I felt the blood rush to my temples as she did so.

'She saw the flush, and it amused her.

'"Clifford! *my* Clifford!" she said, gravely, but as if with a little inward laugh, "will you have your evening sad or merry?"

'"I will have it in nowise changed from what it is," I answered her. "I love you, Véra: not what you were nor what you may be, but just you."

'"I despise what I am," she said, "and I forget what I was. I only look to what I may be."

'"And that is?"

'"First, a great artist."

'"I think you will become a great artist, or at least a surprising one."

'"I think so too. I have always thought to—always meant to."

'"Next?"

'"Never mind what next—my first is that with which you have to do. It's like an acrostic, is it not?"

'She spoke lightly, but I felt my heart sink. Was it possible that, loving me at all, she could let me pass out of her life like this, even in anticipation. "But I shall watch you always, at least," I said huskily.

'"Yes, O yes! But, Clifford—don't laugh at this—I have a sort of feeling that you won't live long; you are the sort of stuff of which martyrs are made."

'"But I've no risk of being martyred nowadays," I answered; and indeed there was that in her earnest tone which froze the laugh upon my lips.

'"Not by the fire or sword," she answered, "and you know I can't explain myself. I have only the instinct of things. To me, some people are like forces that use, and others like forces that must be used. Sex has not much to do with it: indeed I think sometimes the mute force is the more masculine. We women have a trick of exhibiting forces

which are only derived, and derived sometimes in the most extraordinary and extravagant ways. I don't know how we derive them, but we do."

'"What did you derive from Lord Charles Carlton?"

'"Oh! very little: worldly wisdom, ambition—or perhaps only disbelief in things. All sorts of negative qualities, that it didn't hurt him in the least to lose, or do me any good to gain."

'"And what from the Count?"

'"How can I tell you? One is not conscious of these things. Physical strength, I think, that was the kind of gain."

'"Why 'was'?"

'"Because it is over; the Count's life has righted itself."

'"So it seems to me."

'"I am only telling you this with, as it were, a by-stander's conviction. I repeat, I don't really feel it."

'"And what from me?"

'"Oh! from you, art and absurdity in general. Are you not giving me lessons?"

'"Nothing more?"

'"Yes, to be honest, a great deal more. I feel to be deriving from you *all yourself*."

'"The greater my privilege," I answered her, and smiled; but I felt the while an assurance on me that her words were very literally true. And what is to be my reward?"

'"That I cannot tell you. It is out of my reach."

'"Quite out of your reach?"

'She looked at me questioningly. "I think so—quite. . . ."

'"Ah, Véra!" I could contain myself no longer, but flung myself with my head in her lap, that I might not see the steely candour of her gaze. "Ah, Véra! do you not see that I love you beyond anything you can have hoped when you bade me love you; that I give myself for you? Will you not give me something—give me everything—give me yourself?"

'To my surprise she did not answer at first. I had expected perhaps a cold reproof, perhaps a torrent of laughter. No! my deep pain had in some mysterious way communicated itself, I think, to her, for her hands played with my hair, and I felt by the sweetness, as of lilac bloom, that was about me, that she was bending over me half tenderly.

'"Do you want me to marry you?" she said.

'I looked up then, answering I know not what

of passionate affirmation, and met her gaze: it was more chilling than laughter or reproach. She was neither flushed nor pale, only her lips were parted a little as if she were suffering something—trying to remember something—wondering.

'"It would perhaps be just," she said, quietly. "You would marry me, Clifford?"

'Again I burst out with—I know not what, but that it was all longing, like the prayer of a man who cries for light. All at once I seemed to catch a glimpse of eternal day, my gradually narrowed soul was asserting itself, and getting back the mastery: could I let such a boon pass from me?

'"Be it so, then," she answered, with silver accents, that stilled my ardent pleadings; and as she spoke I heard the bells of the town away to our right striking slowly through the cool night air. Again it was like the touch of death upon my life. . . .

'It was eleven o'clock—an hour ago—when this cold troth of hers was plighted me, and I have no glow from it, no hope. I can sit down and begin my diary unmoved with a description of Prinz Ernst and Lord Charles. Strange, but I do not feel that she belongs to me even as much

as she did when I first caught her look of mute appeal. I only feel tightening within me the heartstrings that bind me to her. I used to be able to say, '*I love her*;' that is, that I, as an independent being, had the power and will to choose her for my beloved. Now I cannot say that any more. I can only say, '*I am hers.*'

'I could not have believed that this assertion should not bring me some fresh thrill of sanguine life and joy; but no! I feel my pulse as I sit writing quietly, it is very slow and weak; it is like the pulse in the veins of an old person, in whom all the "springs of being" are low; it does not stir and leap as with any feverish gladness or excitement. I am tired; I suppose I am at rest.

'I go across and look at my face in the glass: it is drawn and pale, unlit by any lamp of the new-found light of Love. I am only Clifford Gray! Clearly—ceaselessly—through the open window, I can hear the river swirling on: it pursues, it masters, it carries down; there is no tenderness in its haste.

'She never kissed me.

'Let me think—how did our evening end? it seems already years ago. "Be it so, then," she answered me; and that meant, "I will marry you,

if you will," the choice resting with me, the obedience hers. *Why should there rest a choice with me?* from her humility or her charity or her pride? "Be it so, then," she answered, and her hands lay cold in mine, and the bells tolled. Why not write 'the bells rang out,' 'the bells pealed?'—I know not: *the bells tolled.*

'We sat still, and I remember that I kissed her hands, and I see that she gave me some of the flowers from her breast, white flowers such as funeral wreaths—(nay, why not such as bridal wreaths?)—are woven of. They are here now, but they have not the charm for me that the little blue gentian had, that was part of what I gave her when there was yet so much she had to learn from me.

'Why—seeing it is all my life that I give—should it seem always to be only death that I gain? . . .

'As we sat so, the tension of our silence was at last relieved by the sound of the Count's footstep on the stair and his hastily opening the door.

'"Véra," he called, "where are you?"

'"Here," she said, rising to greet him, and setting her beautiful pale figure quite in the frame of the lamplight.

'"It is cold for you to be sitting out there now," he said, masterfully. "Come in; I have something to tell you."

'"Mr. Gray is with me, here," she said, rather coldly, as if staying any confidence for the present. He laughed a little, that laugh I never liked to hear.

'"Ah! Mr. Gray," he said, "come you in, too." Why you have made a regular *divan* of my balcony!"

'I did not like his tone, I did not like his words. I am in a state of mental surprise perhaps, that dislikes everything.

'He came to the window, looking very strong and handsome even in our half lights, and making me feel small. His face was flushed, and I saw that he had been drinking more than usual. Véra went up to him, and helped him to remove the fur-lined coat that he had taken for the long drive home in the open air, under the stars—looking him steadily between the eyes as she did so.

'"Had you a pleasant evening?" she said.

'"Charming!" he answered her, again glancing at me, and then from me, with eyes of inquiry, at her. She did not heed this look of inquiry—pur-

posely as I saw. After a moment's mental debate she seemed determined that I should witness everything. Hitherto in all the weeks of our intercourse I had only heard them exchange the merest commonplaces.

'"Did you play?" she asked him.

'"Yes."

'"What did you win?"

'He drew a large roll of notes from his pocket. She took them, and smoothed them out one by one in the lamplight, looking at them critically, and I saw that some of them were for large sums. She did not speak, but I felt that she intended me to watch her.

'"I saw Prinz Ernst in the hall," he said. "I have asked him to dine to-morrow."

'"And Charles Carlton?"

'"*Diantre*! Yes; do you know him?"

'"A little."

'"Would you rather he did not come?"

'"No! I am anxious to make him known to Mr. Gray."

'"To Mr. Gray?—Ah!"

'He spoke as if it had just dawned upon him that Lord Charles might give me a commission for

a picture. Véra disliked the tone, or at least disliked it in my hearing.

'"I think," she said, incisively, "that Mr. Gray will be a very desirable acquaintance for Lord Charles."

'"Ah!"—again with the assent of perfect indifference. I saw the flush rise in her fair cheeks: she bent towards him.

'"Mr. Gray has something to say to you to morrow, *mon cher*," she said; "after which you will perhaps ask him to be of the party."

'"Ah, you wish him to dine?" he said at once, as comprehending the gist of her speech; and then turning to me with the exquisite foreign cordiality that characterised his courtesy, he invited me to dine with them to-morrow; and again there was that in his tone which implied that nothing I could have to say to him could be important enough to cancel that invitation.

I accepted it, half wishing I had some valid excuse to refuse (for I am in a spasm of mistrust about these new comers), and soon after took my leave, for the Count had invited me in a gracefully final manner, as one who postpones more talk until the next meeting.

I went downstairs, leaving them together, and lit my cigarette in the hall of the hotel. While doing so, I heard the door of the Count's room opened and shut, and a moment afterwards Véra came down, and to my surprise joined me in the hall.

'"You really wish me to marry you?" she said.'

'The question was a strange one, and the stranger for the cold abrupt way in which it was asked, spoken in a low nervous tone, in the midst of the common public surroundings of the stairway and hall. I looked at her: it was idle to answer in words and my look said enough, I fancy, for a soft film came over her eyes as she answered it.

'"Well," she went on, "speak to him to-morrow about it—when you like—in the evening when he returns from his drive. But let us have our morning together, as usual."

'"But if he is angry at my presumption?"

'"He will not be angry."

'"What will he say?"

'"I don't know. I fancy he will give you no decided answer. Meanwhile, in the evening, if he has not done so, you must tell Lord Charles that you are my suitor." She smiled a little as her lips fashioned the quaint English word.

'"But how? It is the last thing I should tell a stranger, until I had the right to tell him."

'"I give you your right, Clifford. I wish you to be my suitor, I make you my suitor. I tell you, if you wish that I should marry you, I will." The film had cleared from her fair eyes, and there was no blush upon her face. She looked at me as if she were planning a railway journey or a race. "You must tell Lord Charles that you are engaged to marry me, and you must tell him early in the evening."

'"Shall I pin a label on my shoulder?" I asked her, drawing nearer, fain to make real this new-found happiness of which I was so sceptical; and it was then that she unfastened from her breast the flower that is on my table before me now.

'"Here is your label," she replied; "do not forget"—and so turned and went upstairs, leaving me in the hall, dazed and mute as in a dream.

'As she came to the turn in the stairway, she looked back. She had the little lamp in her hand, as when I first saw her; her face was radiant with a glance as of generous hope, that I had not seen on it before, but her words were light.

'"You look like a man at a funeral," she said,

"in your black clothes and with your white flower. I suppose it is the extinction of your cigarette that you deplore."

'I felt ashamed of my stupidity. I looked up at her and tried to smile. She leaned for an instant over the balusters, lifting the lamp forward, so that it shone upon my face.

'"I like you to belong to me," she said. "I am proud and glad of you, that you are mine;" and then, with a gesture of infinite grace, she just wafted me, with a wave of the little lamp, a "good-night" that seemed half perfume, half flame—and passed out of my sight and reach.

'I did not relight my extinct cigarette, for I heard voices behind me at the moment, and, looking through the glazed doors of the porch, I saw a party of young fellows returning from a late walk in the summer night, or perhaps an evening excursion on the river.

'I came upstairs, and have since been trying to live through the evening again in my imagination —the evening to which I had looked forward so—the evening that has brought me more than I ever dared desire or pray for. But I cannot—it eludes me. I forget half we said; I seem to have

been engaged in solving a long riddle, and to have forgotten the text of it.

What will to-morrow bring? Certainly a declaration from me; certainly Prinz Ernst and Lord Charles Carlton: as certainly fresh beauty and strength to Véra, fresh languors and *malaise* to me, fresh laughter to the Count.' . . .

. . . . . .

Here much that was written, was erased. Clifford had evidently fought with a spirit of weariness and discontent: his nerves had been overtaxed, the writing was weak and careless. I could almost imagine that in his utter disquiet and fatigue he had dropped asleep.

There was a little drawing of the silver lamp at the bottom of the page, which showed, by its delicate work and evidently accurate finish, how the artistic mind may watch and learn when the physical frame is most overstrung. I turned the page, and replenished the fire, which was burning low, and, so doing, I still caught the sound of voices on the stairs, or overhead. It could not have been the doctor that I heard. It was nearly eleven, but at any rate Clifford was not alone—it was of no use my going to him yet.

CHAPTER X.

I read on:

'*Thursday evening.*—Ah! what it is for a man to watch the woman that he loves, when her heart holds his secret and his hers! I feel my youth return to me, with eagles' wings, to soar and be still untired and untried.

'What of to-day? First, it has been the crowning blossom of the year as yet—the air about us, all so steeped in sunlight and in warmth, that the mere features of the land seemed insignificant, just as a great love transfigures what is trivial in the thing it glorifies. The sunshine turned the dirt of the old town roofs and the mud of the river banks to beautiful shadow and colour. I cannot conceive on such a day that any human creature shed a tear of sorrow: if any did, I am well assured that the sun first lit it into a diamond, and then stole it altogether.

'I spoke to the Count this morning; indeed, I

met him on my way upstairs just at the very spot where Véra waved me her kiss last night, and I took the omen. I was glad he was not an Englishman: he would have breakfasted, and have been going out to counteract an unnatural meal by unnatural fatigue. As it was, we were both just awakened by our coffee, and the whole morning was before us for work or play, before we became languid or sulky.

'"Good-morning," he said, with a radiance in his tone. He has that charming foreign manner which seems susceptible to fine weather changes and superior to storm. "You look rested by your quiet evening, Mr. Gray. I had fancied you becoming *maladif* of late."

'"I never felt better or happier in my life," I assured him.

'"I like the look of an Englishman in the morning," he went on, good-naturedly, just as I had been thinking, too, that I liked the look of a foreigner. "He is bracing; he makes me inclined to go and dress myself first, and then spare myself that trouble, because I can look at him instead. Pardon my velvet blouse and my silk shirt, Monsieur Artist. I know they are an insult to the morning."

'He regarded me while he spoke, and I felt that he was looking at my face and figure, rather than at my shepherd's-plaid morning suit, the white shirt, and fresh cotton tie, which he indicated with his quick and expressive gesture as he stood opposite me on the stairs.

'I was silent.

'"Well," he said; "don't you want to be looked at? Isn't the toilet yet complete?" Decidedly his mood was perfect.

'"Look at me as long as you will," I answered. "I want you to look at me. I am for your inspection."

'"This is serious," he answered, opening the door into a little room which adjoined the *salon*, and which he kept as his own den, for by this time we had ascended to the *premier*. I had been on my way up from the reading-room when he met me, and he had turned with me while he spoke. "Come and smoke your cigarette on the balcony with me, and I will inspect you."

'It all happened smoothly, easily, like something in a dream. There was a table in the room, on which stood a cigar cabinet, and a framed portrait of Véra in some Egyptian fancy dress—as Cleopatra

perhaps. I had not seen it before. The window was open to the river, and there was an arm-chair on the balcony, and another just within the room. The Count threw himself into the latter, and watched me as I sat down in the sunlight; and we lit our cigarettes.

'"Well," he said, still in the same tone of banter; "I like the look of you, Mr. Gray: you are clean and honest."

'"That is next best to being godly and clever, I suppose." I answered him in the same tone, and then—the river was hastening, why should I linger?—I asked him bluntly, in my insular way, which I felt was at such a disadvantage against his foreign grace, if he liked me well enough to have me to belong to him.

'"Well," he answered, lightly, "you have so become a part of our life out here, that I feel rather that I should miss you if you went out of it than that I have to introduce you into it. What change do you wish?"

'"I wish to bind myself to you by the dearest chain," I replied, faltering a little. "I wish you to let me be Véra's own." He did not answer, but puffed away at his cigarette, watching me rather

with consideration than anxiety—almost with a tender concern.

'"I think you are that already," he said at length; and then, "You wish my niece, Véra de Trekoff, to marry you, Mr. Gray?"

'I had anticipated anger, surprise, coldness. I was utterly at a loss. I could not answer.

'"Véra is of age," he said; "and I like you. She has her own fortune, and she may marry whom she will. I shall not thwart her."

'I seemed to be in sight of health and youth again on a sudden: was it possible that this was really acquiescence—the seal of our union?

'"Take what I have to give of her," he said, quite readily; "but do not be overjoyed at my leave; she will not marry you."

'I felt the laughter coming about my lips with the breath of the summer wind. "That is for her to decide?" I said, with the memory of her assurance in my heart.

'He nodded, and then settled himself more at his ease in his chair, with the manner of one who puts aside a detail that is for others to settle.

'"Tell me," he said, "why do you wish to marry?"

'"I do not wish *to marry*," I said, conscious that in a foreigner's view I was going to put the cart before the horse. "I do not wish to *marry*—I wish *to marry your niece*."

'"Yes, but why? For your own sake or hers?"

'"For mine, and because I think I can make her very happy."

'"Time enough to talk of that by-and-by," he answered, lightly again, "when the day is fixed. Meanwhile let me take your point of view. I am aware that you are not rich indeed, but you are not poor: you have sufficient means, and you have your freedom. Why bind yourself to one woman or another?"

'I should have been annoyed by the way in which he alluded to Véra, had it not been for his relationship to her and his love of her, and, beyond that, for the evident curiosity with which he was sounding me.

'"I love Mlle. Véra," I said, shyly.

'"Well, say that you love her: even so, am I not right in feeling that your love for her is not the common feeling which leads to such a declaration? Let me explain what I mean. Mlle. de Trekoff has some influence upon you, stronger than yourself.

You admire her—that is nothing. You do not approve her—that is everything, for a wife I mean."

'"I would not have her changed," I answered.

'"No; but you *would* change her. Hitherto she has changed you more than you think, but all the same your influence over her has been great—you believe there are possibilities of its being greater. My friend, does it ever occur to you that you are not the only person who has influenced Mlle. de Trekoff—that you are not the first who has yielded to her influence?"

'There was something unfair, to my sense of his duty towards her, in this ironical mention of my lady, and I said nothing, but I felt my eyelids hot.

'"You think me strange," he added, with a slight air of vexation, and I remember that he knocked the ashes from his cigarette impatiently at this juncture. "Whatever objections I had chosen to make to *you* would have seemed natural enough, but because I make objections to my niece on your behalf, I am incomprehensible. And yet indeed I am your friend, only that I fear to be doing you an injustice in furthering your suit. I repeat she will not marry you, and—for all that I am your friend (I repeat that also)—I do not wish that she should

do so. It is true that you might regain your health."—I could not repress a start, he spoke as if almost with second sight, openly formulating a possibility which had crossed my own fancy like a dream. . . "What of that?" He raised himself on his elbow, and looked at me as he went on. "You would have lost your illusions."

'"And I have not lost my health with vain longing, thanks to you," I answered, rising; for I was conscious of a strain upon us both that was not the less painful for the sense of some involuntary confidence.

'"No; certainly you have my good word," he said, and rose also.

'We stood together at the window; the river ran past us, fretting and boiling, the sun looked calmly on. Somehow it seemed to me a moment in which there was that to have been said which we did not say. Life is full of these tragic moments: something or other—hurrying time or the swift river—carries them away, and men's souls regain their balance. The Count looked at me, for the first time since I had known him, with something other than his usual kindliness or even interest—something akin to pity. I held out my hand.

'"Ah!" he said, as he shook it with a mock gravity, that was not jest. "The light jade that Hope is! You have been ailing this long time—you are well to-day: it is a touch that sets you up—a touch will overthrow you! Be strong: get the better of yourself. Look at me. I have taken the turn, I am well: it is my old sickness that I have passed on to you: 'Life in another?' It is an idle thing—live for yourself."

'I shook my head, I could not fathom his meaning: it seemed wider and yet more reasonable than his speech. I pressed his hand again with my sanguine palm—his own grasp was not less cordial. Then I left him. . . .

'"So far so good," I thought; but that was not half the good of my day! I opened the next door but one, which was standing ajar, having the Count's leave to proceed to Véra.

'She was standing in her holland painting-blouse, her bright head above it like a flower out of its sheath—laughing, with her hands clasped behind her, and all the room—our *atelier*—was in grim disarray. As I came in, she made some dancing steps towards me.

'"Well," I said, "you belong to me."

'"Is it possible?" she answered, withdrawing the hand she had almost proffered. "Then I won't shake hands with you;" and she continued her gliding motion along the floor, and passed me.

'"Véra," I began.

'"*R'gardez par-ci, r'gardez par-là*," she interrupted me. Our dinner-party is to be here: it is my idea, my plan—it is to be my success. Hush! the Count does not know, and I want to surprise him. He thinks we are to dine in another room; but no! I will have a holiday from my painting, and we will arrange this: it will be charming. One will be more *chez-soi* than wandering up and down the stairways of this inn."

'"Ah! if it had not been for stairways'—

'"—You would never have intruded here. But as you *are* here, and as smart as a bridegroom, you shall help me. Take the other end of this," she said, setting a long light table between us.

'"But Véra!"

'"But Véra what?"

'"But Véra, say 'good-morning.'"

'"Good-morning!" with a voice like a thrush and a turn of the head like a wren.

'"But Véra, kiss me."

'"But Clifford, no! I will not kiss you." She paused, and I could almost fancy she was paler, but she was standing with her back to the light at the instant, and when she turned she was radiant again. "Here is my maid, and I do not want to teach her bad manners."

'I sighed as her tirewoman entered, a dull heavy-looking Frenchwoman of about fifty—one of those people you would never credit with taste till you saw their skill. No doubt there was a divine lightness and beauty in Vulcan's shield and spear-craft, while Adonis would have been a clumsy smith.

'At any rate Julie—that is her name—is capable, and with her aid we transformed the *salon* in something less than an hour. She had brought in great baskets of flowers, wild and trained, and piles, too, of fruit, which Véra wished to arrange with her own hands. How she seemed to brighten and make homely the bare big room, as she crossed and recrossed it—and what an hour it was for me!

'But she would not let Julie leave us.

'For an instant, however, we found ourselves together on the balcony, shaking the dust from a bit of foreign stuff that we had hung over a chair

some days since, as a background. Then she looked at me in the sunlight, as the Count had done, and laughed.

'"You are happy and well," she said.

'I returned her glance: she *was* paler, certainly; and as I observed her I noticed that, despite her gaiety, she had a look upon her as if she had not slept.

'"You are tired," I said. "All this *remue-ménage* in the heat is too much for you."

'"Too much for me! and I have the next room to do also! I am of iron. It is only the undoing of our work together that distresses me. Look at our *atelier* it is just a dining-room now. 'Very pretty?' O yes, I know; but a dining-room. Where are our easels, our canvases, our pencils? All put by, set aside, done, and for eating's sake. Tell me, Clifford—my Clifford" (with a little smile of appropriation only half tender), "which do you think is best—the studio or the dining-room?"

'"That is a question, indeed, to ask an artist!"

'"But no! You are like all men, you think the dining-room. Our laborious mornings, in which I have learnt so much; our sad days together, when you were so languid and so helpful—how glad

you are to set them all aside for dinner—for common joys and health!"

'She paused. I caught her meaning.

'"I have at least," I said, "the grace to give thanks, and to trust my health and common joys to bring me a fresh strength for my work."

'She shook her head.

'"There is no to-morrow," she answered; "and the past is past. I know—you imagine: and you are, after all, as other men."

'"I am blest beyond them all," I replied; "and to-morrow we will work afresh, with such a zest!"

'She smiled again, a rather careless smile. "To-morrow it is to be as you will, I suppose," she answered.

'Julie came to the window and twitched the bit of old stuff away from us, to put it for a chair-back on the Prince's seat. Véra leaned back against the window-frame, a look of fatigue upon her.

'"You are tired," I said.

'"Yes; I feel that you are eluding me. Clifford, it must be either you or I."

'"Why not both together?"

'"No."

'"Then you, you always," I answered her.

'I said it in concession rather to her tired look than to her literal words; and hardly conscious of my own meaning, but with whatever signification she took it, it seemed to satisfy her. By the time we had finished turning our *atelier* into a banqueting hall, it was the hour of her *déjeuner*, and I left her. "For," she said, "we are to have high holiday to-day, and you must help me no more in my surprises, because I want to surprise you also. Oh! you do not know how pretty I can make a room when I am put to it. I have been used to that all my life, and I have a box of things that I carry about with me for the purpose—my properties."

'"Why have I never seen them?" I asked her.

'"Oh, you! A woman, Mr. Clifford Gray, can see at once, when a man has looked at her, if he sees nothing else. No need of decorations then—*à quoi bon?* But *ces Messieurs*, they have not looked at me. Perhaps I don't want them to, perhaps I do. Anyway, to-night I want my decorations, and while they are looking at the pretty things, you and I can look at each other."

'Julie came to ask if she should unpack the stuffs. Our *tête-à-tête* was ended, for Véra sent me

away before she despatched her maid. "Bring the box here, Julie," she said, turning her open sleeves still higher up on her round white arms; and then to me quickly, "*Va-t-en, mon maître!*" she added, with an exquisite laughter in her eyes.

'"Till to-night," I said dolefully; but I don't suppose my tone was very sad, I felt so happy.

'"Till to-night at eight," she said decisively, "when you will see me in my glory."

'"What shall you wear?" I said.

'"White—white always. No! you need send me no flowers; that is my maid's business."

'We were still in the balcony. Julie was gone within. I may have looked disappointed, for she added, lifting up a little scissors from some old silver charms at her girdle, "Wait a bit! Who was it sang of hyacinthine locks? I will have a hyacinth among my flowers to-night."

'I stooped down, and she lifted up her arms, white and bare, and cut a piece of hair from my forehead. The sweet stir of her sleeves about me, the lilac-perfume of her head as I bent over her, seemed to have an elemental force about them, a lavish influence, like a summer day's. I felt giddy with pleasure.

'She touched my forehead with her hands, smoothing the curly hair she had disarranged. Then she stroked the lock she held, and laughed again as it twined round her fingers. I felt as if she were still touching *me*, and not a mere dissevered curl. She put it into one of the tiny silver trifles that hung with the scissors from her waist.

'"And now go, and don't teach Julie idleness any more."

'I turned and went in, to the black dark, as it seemed after that sunburnt balcony, and there was Julie standing, holding open the door for me to pass out into the cool corridor beyond. She gave me a cold curious look. I seemed to feel her eyes on my blade-bones as I went downstairs and out into the warm air again, and I could fancy that she smiled. She is one of those women whom, one feels, no amount of blade-bone or fleshly covering can prevent seeing into one's heart.'

CHAPTER XI.

'*Night.*—A thousand years of purgatory are to end, we trust, and my afternoon ended. Indeed, it drowsed itself away for me between drawing my Véra's face and thinking of her, and was perhaps, in its entire calm and peace, the loveliest my life has yet known. And at last came her dinner hour.

'I met the Count going into his dressing-room as I went to the door of their *salon* on the stroke of eight, and he inveigled me back with him while he finished dressing.

'"Our guests are not come yet," he said, "and Véra—your Véra" (with a half-ironical laugh) "is still upstairs. She is always late. O yes, she knows she is worth waiting to see."

'But Véra was not late to-day. When we went into the *salon* she was there before us.

'And Lord Charles Carlton was with her.

'The room was very pretty. I saw at once that

it was utterly transformed—full of delicate scent and soft light—and the windows, still open, were sufficiently shaded by drooping stuffs to allow of the exclusion of daylight.

But I did not notice that at first; I only noticed Lord Charles Carlton and Véra.

'She was sitting on a low stool by the unlit stove, which was arranged with flowers, to which she was putting a few finishing touches; and she was not looking at her companion—who indeed was standing some paces distant from her—but straight before her at her handiwork, as you may have seen people look into the fire when thoughtful, or talking with a familiar friend. Lord Charles was looking at her, and he had a beautiful picture to gaze at, as with a lover's pride (Ah! my darling! . . .) I thought at once.

'She was dressed in white, indeed, as she was yesterday evening, but white—"with a difference"—with *what* a difference! Whereas last night she had been in some soft flowing stuff—pure white like a daisy's circlet—she was clad to-night in creamy silk, white like the outer leaves of a narcissus flower, and bright with gleaming fringes and interwoven threads of some fine sparkling stuff, which crystal-

lised her into a princess of the North or the Naïad of some frozen fountain. The front of her dress was starred with diamonds, and at her side was a fan of white feathers—some second token from Niagara perhaps—with a looking-glass like a diamond in its centre. Her eyes, too, shone like diamonds in her face, which looked paler than usual, and their dark lashes were all that was not faintly tinted about her. The chameleon glittered to-night in the curls of her blonde honey-coloured hair, among many of her favourite funeral flowers; and at her breast, half-hidden among lace and diamonds, I detected the little silver casket that I knew held my hair. She looked older, I thought, than on the previous evening, rather sad than merry.

'Neither Véra nor Lord Charles were speaking as we entered, and when she presented me to him, it was with the air of one who has not spoken for some minutes.

'"This is Mr. Clifford Gray," she said, looking not at me but at him, "to whom I owe a great deal, and who is good enough to wish to marry me."

'Then I, following her eyes, looked at Lord Charles Carlton also.

'I did so because she accented the last words ever so little, as if there were something in them that would specially command his attention. He looked at me with an unfeigned surprise.

'"I congratulate Mr. Gray," he said, "upon having the courage to address you."

'At this moment Mrs. Chesterton and her daughters were announced, and that monumental lady entered in considerable feather—if such a term be permissible applied to stone. The Misses Chesterton were less monumental, more evidently eager. They had all done their best to accentuate their charms by dress; but what could they do beside Véra? Nevertheless, I noticed a certain quiet self possession about their movements which she has not, and which I suppose only age—is it age?—can give.

'Mrs. Chesterton was kinder to Lord Charles than her strictures on his character would have warranted one in expecting. Indeed, the advances were rather on her side than his; but then was not he the key to Prinz Ernst's favour?

'After a somewhat careless recognition of this excellent lady, and a curt stare at her daughters, which might have conveyed more of compliment

than it did, had he wished thoroughly to ingratiate himself with them, Lord Charles exchanged a few words with the Count and left the room.

'Mrs. Chesterton's censure was certainly banished for this evening. She admired Véra's beautiful toilette, of the *luxe* of which I became vicariously aware through her eyeglass, and said nothing more of the *mauvais sujet* who was her fellow-guest than that "Lord Charlie was in excellent looks;" while the Misses Chesterton, who had fronted me with the Count, something as the three do one in the fourth figure of a quadrille, one on each side of him, murmured their little nothings about the improvised decoration of the apartment.

'I longed to intercept the eyeglass and get across to Véra, who stood now, but did not quite forego her occupation with the flowers; but I had scarcely mapped out a route to her that should circumvent the gorgon, when Lord Charles re-entered, with Prinz Ernst and two more gentlemen who were travelling with him, in attendance—Germans, who spoke bad French and no English, and whom I may therefore dismiss with a word from my recital of our evening.

'The Prince is charming. As the humblest

member of our group, I fancied I should have time to stand aside and watch him; but upon the Count's presenting me, he at once recognised me as having been in the dining-room during his dinner yesterday evening. And then the Count explained—but very lightly—that I was an English artist; and Véra, too, turned towards me, but did not repeat what she had said to Lord Charles, thinking, no doubt, that Prinz Ernst would soon be informed of my pretensions by him.

'However that might be, Prinz Ernst shook hands with me, and was very cordial and pleasant.

'My second impression of him confirms the satisfaction of my first glance, and I like the touch of his hand: it is manly, and has healthy heart-blood in it. He is above the middle height—slim for a German, but with something of national character in the square face, blue eyes, fair hair, and thick moustache, twisted out straight, and not spoiling the curves of the full ripe lips or hiding the strong white teeth. He has the soldier's build, too; and although that does not enter into a picture well, I like to see it in a living gentleman.

'I like Prinz Ernst. I am sure he would do no one any wrong. He has the Saxon musical look

that, if it does not go with craft and firmness, goes at least with sweet temper and honesty. He can love and I think he can suffer. I like to watch him, too; not as one who cared much to study human nature would like to watch Lord Charles Carlton's dark face and lithe form, but as an artist likes to watch a face that is the truthful index of emotions.

'I have never seen Véra more splendid than in her reception of her guests. She seemed to me to glow at all points like a diamond, and the young fellow's face flushed manfully with admiration and surprise. He laid his hand over his heart, upon which there was a riband and an order.

'Dinner was served almost immediately in the adjoining *salon*, the one we had arranged together in the morning. One would hardly have known it again in its new decoration. A lamp of silver shaded with rose-colour shone softly upon the large round table, and there were a few choice flowers and *bonbons* upon it—everything quite simple, Véra alone resplendent. I sat upon her right, opposite to Prinz Ernst, who was between her and Miss Chesterton; one of his suite separating her from her mother, who was thus on the

Count's right, and opposite to her second daughter. Next to this latter was Lord Charles, the second young German noble being between him and myself. As I could not speak German or my neighbour English, I was the more limited to watching Véra than I should have been under usual circumstances, and certainly she was more radiant than ever. Despite the substantial Teuton between us, I could see that Lord Charles Carlton was observing her also, and—by the occasional bending forward of his fine profile—that he was not wholly indifferent to me.

'The conversation was carried on in French—that is when it was general; but for the most part everyone was speaking a foreign language, which must have given the polyglot waiters who attended on us the impression that one gets from seeing men trying to appear at home on stilts. The Count and Véra have something more than the ordinary Russian facility as linguists; but Véra is not really at home in German or the Count in English, and part of the time at least they were talking in these tongues to their respective neighbours. My German neighbour and I talked our *minimum* in equally indifferent French, Lord

Charles's fluent German assisting him somewhat on the other side. Mrs. Chesterton confined herself to her native tongue, with an occasional trite saw in French, lettered forth like the inscription on a monumental tablet; while her daughters, out of their depth in any foreign tongue but French—and only capable of disporting themselves in the shallows of that—floundered with little charm amid German and even Russian phrases which they professed anxiety to acquire.

And yet it was brilliant. Above the ebb and flow of various speech was the fire of intelligible eyes, the understanding of bright and world-sharpened senses, and the *impromptu* of it all—the changed room, the exquisitely chosen and well-served dinner, the sense of being at home and yet entertained as a stranger, made the festival to me, unlike any function at which I have assisted. The young Prince, too, was evidently happy, and the happiness of so bright a creature is as contagious as an elder's dulness.

"You admire my room, sir," Véra said to him in German. "You are very kind—it is the one thing on which you can compliment me honestly! My dress, which you have already done me the honour

to approve, is my man-milliner's, my coiffure is my maid's, and my jewels are my uncle's taste; but the room I have made myself this morning, out of four walls, two windows, and a portmanteau of old *chiffons*, bought from an Abraham, in whose bosom I almost lived, in Paris."

'"With whom did you live in Paris?" asked Lord Charles, also in German. Their eyes exchanged glances like the first harmless sword-thrusts in a duel.

'"Why don't you speak to me in English?" she said. "You see I am at a loss in German, and to hear you speak it cannot give his Highness pleasure." And then she said a few soft words to me in a tone so gentle and different that he could not have failed to remark it.

'"Mlle. de Trekoff is lovely to-night," I heard Mrs. Chesterton say to the Count in measured Memnon tones.

'"Yes," he answered her. "Véra has exerted herself little of late, and she likes society. It is my health that has given her so long a respite from it."

'"Every fresh acquaintance has some fresh incense of admiration for her," said Lord Charles, with a tinge of bitterness in his tone.

'"Yes?" replied Miss Chesterton, with a nasty feminine little query, like a fishhook, at the end of the affirmative.

'"Mlle. de Trekoff does not need incense," said the Prince, in French, addressing the Count, but looking at his beautiful hostess. "She is like one of her own flowers, and exhales a truer perfume."

'"They are funeral flowers," said Lord Charles; and then perceiving that his remark surprised and chagrined the Prince, whom it is evidently his wish to please, he added, "compared with the liveliness of her charm," and restored composure to his young Highness' face.

'Véra took little heed of what was said about her. She is a model listener, though her beauty makes itself almost too vividly seen,—too perceptibly felt. I began to ache as I looked at her, as one's eyes might ache with looking at some wonderful white blossom amid a host of less crystalline bloom. She said scarcely anything beyond what a hostess must say, though her silence was not the less magnetic. Prinz Ernest seemed to expand under its influence, and talked, and ate and laughed, and talked again, as if *he* were the syco-

phant that must needs make the conversation, instead of the potentate that had to smile on it. If our host's lodestar were the approbation of his noble guest, that was without doubt secured. I felt over against him like the mere rock that takes the echo, but cannot give it back.

'There was no talk of politics and little of art. We had met together, as the Count put it, "just to eat our dinner and make ourselves agreeable;" so that conversation was subservient to our agreeability and our appetite. Véra indeed is for a woman, even, very self-centred in her interests: she is, as she always says, "still growing." At present she gains always from those about her more than she gives; but she has also, more than others, a charming ease in answering people, that stamps her as a woman of the world. The Misses Chesterton, unaffected as they are, have not this; they have a more maidenly reserve that, I suppose, is insular.

'The Prince is making no long stay at Basle, which he regrets, I am sure sincerely. Véra does not seem to care enough for him to regret whether he goes or stays.

'"I have little doubt," she says, "but that we shall meet again."

'"Indeed, where your star rises, it must enlighten me," he answers.

'"The world is small," says Mrs. Chesterton, in the old tablet tone.

'"Yes," replies Lord Charles; "I never thought to meet Mlle. de Trekoff here, or I should not so nearly have dissuaded the Prince from making any stay."

'The Count raises his eyebrows, Mrs. Chesterton's eyes telegraph across to her daughters. When she is alert she reminds me more of a Gothic railway station than of the cathedral she usually connotes.

'"Lord Charles and I are old acquaintances," says Véra, quietly.

'These little things I noticed, because they broke into the easy babble of our feast of tongues with a moment's consequent silence; else dinner passed without any other conversational value than that at its close we felt at home in each other's company.

'An exquisite glance, a breath of flowers, followed by a monumental uprising and a clustering rustle—the ladies had left the table. We were to follow almost immediately, but the Count moved

round first and separated me from the Prince. Afterwards, when we had risen to light our cigarettes, I found Lord Charles Carlton next me. There was something in his look, interrogative, almost impertinent.

'"You are anxious to marry Mlle. de Trekoff?" he said quickly, speaking as one who opens a conversation of some moment, and in which there is no time to lose.

'I answered him simply enough, as she had bade me, that Véra had accepted my proposal that very morning. A sudden change passed over his face, the look of confidence gave way to one of surprise, which I detected for an instant before he could smooth it into one of congratulation.

'"You are a very fortunate fellow," he said; "you will have a very beautiful wife."

'I saw no occasion to thank him for his verdict, it was a sufficiently obvious one. He was silent, as if the conversation upon which he was going to launch had ceased to be suitable; and when he spoke again it was merely in commonplaces upon Véra's talent and charm. I felt a curiosity to ask him what he had been about to say to me, but could find no reasonable excuse for doing so. Instead, I turned

to the Count and joined in his talk with Prinz Ernst, who attracts me more.

'In five minutes, and at the sound of the piano, we followed Véra and the Chestertons into the adjoining room. It was now brilliantly lit, some scented tapers or incense were burning, and the *froissés* curtains were drawn up, admitting all the beauty of the summer night and the music of the green river.

'We were to take our coffee together, and some of us drifted towards the balcony. It was covered with silken stuffs and cushions, as it had partially been on the previous evening. I looked at the *divan* they made there, with a thought of yesterday. Véra's eyes were very eloquent as they answered mine; but she had her duties as a hostess to perform, and she brought Prinz Ernst out through the window by which I was standing.

'"Go," she said to me as they passed me, "and stop Miss Chesterton's singing—it is terrible."

'Prinz Ernst smiled. "You are severe for my German pedantry!" he added softly.

'"No: I am weary with the Russian cars!" she said, and laughed.

'Miss Lavinia had just finished her song, when

I went to sit by her and tried to engage her in conversation—but I had nothing to say to her. Despite my extreme happiness this evening, I have felt but a poor fellow when out of the reach of Véra's helpful smile and speaking eyes. I feel always when she goes that she takes what is best of me with her. Miss Lavinia and I gravitated also to the balcony. Mrs. Chesterton engaged the Count in conversation, and manœuvred to hem in her other daughter with Lord Charles, to whom I cannot but feel she would sacrifice her, soul and body, could she but hope that such a sacrifice would be celebrated by the marriage noose. My vocal friend and I found ourselves standing at the window: from where I leant among the curtains—my vantage post of yesterday evening—I could see Véra and Prinz Ernst. His face is so happy and young, that not even moonlight pales it; but she looked white and thoughtful. I could only listen to her voice, which belonged as much to the outer air and the river's song as Miss Lavinia's to the hotel room and the clinking of the coffee-cups.

"'Do you like Lord Charles?' she said; and then, without waiting for an answer, "he is no

friend, sir, of mine; I have had the misfortune to give him offence."

'"It is a brother of his who was my college friend," he replied. (I think Prinz Ernst would say no ill of anyone.) "I knew Charles but slightly. I met him at the Duke's last winter, and our schemes of an early autumn tour agreed. He joined me in Paris only ten days ago."

'"Are you intimate with him already, sir?" she asked, with a shade of contempt in her tone.

'"No," he replied, quite readily; and I could not but see how easily, with a word or a glance, she might destroy any intimacy that was ripening between Lord Charles and him.

'It is this immediate influence of Véra's, this electric attraction or beseeching, which is what is rarest and least resistible about her.

'But I had to talk to Miss Lavinia! The minutes wore themselves away. The Count and Mr Chesterton approached the window also, while two *attachés* were standing near a card-table. looked from Véra to me, and I could fancy t he smiled, although his countenance remained unmoved. Mrs. Chesterton sidled towards the Prince,

and tried to engage his attention. Véra made way for her at once, and turned with a light joyous grace, as of one that has accomplished a duty, back to the window where my maiden and I were standing.

"'Come out, Clifford," she said. "You must spare him to me, Miss Lavinia: he belongs to me quite now, you know." Miss Lavinia did *not* know, and the news surprised her, but the Count crossed the room to her at that moment. The monument had slipped out, and set itself in the glow of royalty upon the balcony, protecting its marble by a hastily snatched wrap—one of the pieces of work we had arranged in the morning. Véra and I were alone for the moment.

"'Did you talk to Lord Charles?" she said.

"'No, and yes: he said something to me."

"'And you told him we were engaged?"

"'Yes; and then he said no more. I think he was going to tell me something."

"'Yes?" The word was only half an interrogative. "What was it?"

"'Oh, nothing, everything! It just depends how one regards things. I will tell you some day, but not to-night."

'We leaned over the balcony together. The river—our river, that had been health and exercise and air, and almost meat and drink to us so long—ran swifter than ever, as it seemed to me, beneath us.

'"Clifford," she said, "you see I have undone our studio."

'"Yes; you have turned your *salons* into a *palazzetto*."

'"It is strange that I should have taken so much trouble for one night, is it not?"

'"For one night?"

'"Yes."

'"You mean that you will remake our *atelier* to-morrow."

'"No. I mean that to-morrow we are going away."

'"Going away!" The river seemed to leap up into my eyes and ears with a splash. Then it went on, and I heard Mrs. Chesterton's slow voice talking to the Prince about the Oxford gardens as "*so* invaluable to the *student*." (I suppose she was in them once for a June *fête*.)

'"Yes; do not be alarmed; you are coming too."

'"Then," I said, 'it does not matter where we go. But are you tired of this?"

'"No; but I hate people. I want to be alone and at work; you see we are pursued even here."

'"Where shall we go?"

'"Either to complete solitude or to a crowd."

'"To solitude then."

'"There is no solitude *à trois*. Besides, I am a woman, and your vote for solitude decides my contrariety. We will go to Paris." And she sang softly:

Je vais où va toute chose,
Où va la feuille de rose,
Et la feuille de laurier.

'"To Paris in August?"

'"Well, you want solitude—and then perhaps to England."

'"And then——"

'"*Perhaps we will stay in England, you and I.*"

'So saying, with that divine promise so royally given on her lips, she turned from me and overset all Mrs. Chesterton's reminiscences of Oxford by a word to Prinz Ernst.

'"If you want to play Nap, sir," she said care-

lessly, "we had better begin while the night is yet young."

'Mrs. Chesterton does not play Nap. I believe that cards are against her principles, and I am certain it would be against her principles to lose. No! Mrs. Chesterton does not play Nap.

'But the Misses Chesterton do!

'We had a round game, and they made laudable efforts to keep pace with the Count and Véra. Her easy grace when playing is remarkable, and brought back vividly to me our evening at *ecarté* in the storm together at the Beau Rivage Hotel; and there were moments when I think she recollected it also—only moments, for the heart and memory of her do not seem yet full grown, but, as it were, come in flashes.

'With her background of richly embroidered stuffs gleaming in the full light from lamp and candle which lit up the silver of her dress and the gold of her hair, it would not have mattered any more, I think, to Prinz Ernst than it did to me what game we played. All the rest of the figures seemed like faded phantoms beside her.

'And there is that of flame-like in her which

prevents one's eyes from wandering to any of her less significant surroundings.

'The evening went away on light wings, only Véra and I sharing the consciousness that it was not to be one of many, but the first and last of this pleasant, idle, rosy-coloured life. The winnings of the Prince and the Count were almost equal, when Mrs. Chesterton's yawns told us that the night was no longer young, and hinted as truly that Mrs Chesterton was no longer young either. After lighting their cigarettes by Véra's gracious permission, the Prince and his friends withdrew, and we did not detain the Chestertons. Lord Charles also lingered behind a moment to express a hope to me that we should meet to-morrow, and to whisper his *à demain alors* over Véra's hand. She bowed, and offered no contradiction to his wish, but her eyes told me that she would not see him again, and that her suggestion of leaving to-morrow will be certainly carried out.

'The Count accompanied his guests downstairs to the smoking-room. We were alone in the light, the perfume, the disorder, for our "good-night."

'Véra leant over the card-table still, and her

hands played with the counters, but her luminous eyes looked straight before her out of the window into the cool dark. I stood by her, leaning on the table also.

'"You are very silent, *mon ami*!" she said. "Did I not please you to-night?"

'"You pleased me, if you pleased yourself."

'"Myself? Do you think I pleased his High ness?"

'"There is no question of that."

'"But you think so?"

'"Certainly."

'"And Lord Charles—the comic song man?"

'"No"

'"Well; the play is over, the decorations may be rolled up. You are behind the scenes. You see me without my rouge."

'"Is it all acting?"

'"All acting: I am bored."

'"Then I am glad."

'"Why? Silent all the evening, and then glad that I am bored."

'"I was wondering, if you loved this luxury, how you would endure your life with me?"

'"My life with you?—Ah! forgive me. I am

stupid as well as bored to-night. What matter with whom? My life is still my life."

She went on shifting the cards and playing with the counters, letting them slip through her fingers without looking at them, and then filling her hand with more. The handfuls seemed like records of the moment's giving and taking. There was silence.

'I heard the clocks in the room counting the time out hurriedly. I took courage.

'"When will you marry me, Véra?" I said.

'"When you will," she answered, abruptly—not at once, but after a moment's pause. And then, with one of her lithe sudden gestures, she came round the corner of the table that divided her from me, and laid her two hands upon the two fronts of my coat. The light was full upon her. I could see my prize, and I could see that she was sad. For the first time I put my arms round her and drew her towards me, her low white brow and scented diamond-sprent hair upon a level with my lips. She did not look at me from under her dark lashes, but at the flower in my coat, a tiny faded sprig of what she had given me last night. Her

senses were with me, but her thoughts were away in the past or the future.

'Something ailed her, her little fingers closed and unclosed upon the edges of my coat. The gems upon them sparkled feverishly.

'"How strong your heart-beats are!" she said, presently.

'"Yes! I feel the life of Adam in me; you are mine."

'She trembled.

'"I almost feel," she said, "that I could give myself for you."

'"You love me, Véra?"

'"Almost; it is always almost, and then I save myself by an effort."

'"Why?"

'"Because I am better without loving—it is like a sickness."

'"I feel it is my strength."

'"Love that one takes is one's life," she said; "love that one gives is one's death. I have always seen that. I do not want to love you much."

'"I am worthy love, though I be worthy little praise or heartache, dear; for love is worthy love."

'"You are a bit of a poet, Clifford."

'"Do you mean a bit of a fool?"

'She smiled—"Perhaps." Her tone was low and sweet.

'"Why are you sad?"

'"Because you love me."

'"Is not that well?"

'"Very well; the best—only I nearly love you, too."

'"Is not that better than the best?"

'"I do not know. Clifford, shall I say what you would do if you were wise?"

'"I think so, I am going to do it." I drew her towards me, closer, and stooped my lips to hers but she bent her face low on my breast.

'"I am in earnest," she said.

'"Well, what should I do?"

'"You would kill me now."

'"For whose sake?" Her tone had been so grave that I could only answer gravely too.

'"For your own sake," she said.

'"And why?"

'"I cannot put it into words. I think it is because we are so nearly equal now. My pulse seems to take its beat from yours."

'"And by-and-by it will be always so."

'"Will it? Why wait for that? I think we have climbed a certain distance together; beyond, there is only room for one."

'"Are not we two one?"

'"If you will."

'"Why always *if I will*?"

'"It is to rest with you," she said, her tone almost a whisper. "Only if you were wise you would kill me now."

'"Say why."

'"Not here. I do not know myself, I am tired. Clifford, let us look out on the river once more together."

'We went to the balcony, I had almost to support her thither. How supple she was, how fair! We stood out on the bedizened stone in the still dark, and listened. I could just rest my cheek upon her hair.

'"Clifford?"

'"Véra."

'"It has been a happy time."

'I could not answer.

'"It is over."

'"It is the beginning."

'"No, it is the end;" and then she put her hand

across my lips. "Poor Clifford!" she said, sadly.

'The Count entered the room. "Véra!" he called. She roused herself, and stood erect and wakeful.

'"Well!"

'"Are you out there? You will be tired."

'"I *am* tired."

'"At last! You say you never feel fatigue."

'"I am not fatigued, I am tired of this place."

'"That is a pity, for the Prince wants us to organise an expedition to-morrow."

'"We cannot."

'"Why not?"

'"Because we are going away."

'"Going away?"

'"To-morrow." With a bend of the head.

'"Impossible!"

'"Not impossible; certain. I can't stand people, that is all." And she ran lightly in, scattering her rose-leaves as she went up to him and kissed him. "Leave all that to me, *mon cher*. Your German Prince is all very well; but his friend—*Oh! quelle scie, j'en ai plein le dos!*"

'He made no attempt to dissuade her. I do not think he has any care for people, and it is arranged

that we shall leave to-morrow. To-morrow! it is to-day, for I have been writing of my yesterday far into the small hours of the morning. Véra had something further to say to her uncle, and dismissed me with a word, whereupon, my book, I have registered —how lifelessly!—my impressions of the evening in you.'

CHAPTER XII.

I READ my friend's account with a leisurely interest only, disturbed as I was towards the conclusion by the recurring sound of carriage wheels before his small Gothic porch. Just as I was skimming these last words I heard a rustle of silk in the hall, which decided me that his visitor had not been the doctor. I was not summoned, it was no business of mine, but I could not repress an instinct that something was amiss or unusual to warrant the advent of a medical Portia.

I lifted up a lath of the green Venetian blind and looked out. The window commanded only a corner of the porch, and its step. There was a brougham before it, and the tall figure of a woman with very fair hair, clad all in black and veiled, was just getting into it. A clear bright voice, like a sleigh-bell on the frosty autumn night,

gave some order to the coachman, and the brougham drove off rapidly, and out of the open gate on to the high road.

I rang the bell. It was answered by Clifford's foreign servant, a discreet Italian. I stood at the door, awaiting him.

'Is your master ill?' I said in French.

'I have had no summons, sir.'

'But there was a carriage. I feared something might be wrong.'

'It is a lady whom I believe he expected at this hour.'

I could ask no more questions, my anxiety was evidently not needed, but I could not shake it off As the Italian turned and went downstairs again, the air in the hall was wafted towards me by the flapping of the *portière* at the entry. It had the faintest fragrance of exotics in it, or did that come from the box of scented daphne that was standing near the door in the little room? Perhaps so.

'I noticed it afresh, as I re-entered.

'Indeed the atmosphere seemed heavy with the breath of flowers. I threw open the window, for the fire was burning fiercely now, and the oppressiveness of the room was intolerable.

Some nervousness or dread was upon me. I could not shake it off, but the draught of cool Norwood air restored my tone presently. I listened and looked out: the night was cold, and the stars shone very brightly. It was peculiarly still outside, there was not a whisper among the boughs. I looked back into the room; it had an elfin aspect, despite its warmth and cosiness. I shut to the window, while outside I could hear the Italian bolting and barring the door, and I let down the blind just as he came sleepily into the room again.

'Did Monsieur want anything? the hour was late.'

'Nothing—but his master?'

'Ah! Monsieur, Mr. Gray will never be disturbed when he has once retired.'

'But he begged me to go to his room on my way up.'

'*Pardieu*, it is possible; he is often very late.'

'Good-night.'

'Good-night.'

He went out and left me. Should I go upstairs lifford, or should I go on reading? I ruffled the of the book with my hand; there was a great

blank towards the end; there was not much more to read. I turned the leaves slowly back, when a word attracted my attention. I pulled the lamp towards me again, found my place hastily, and looked straight on. There were some pages with very short entries, made perhaps *en route*, and then a sketch in a railway carriage, evidently taken during some night journey, and which—looked at in this lamplight—had a very strange reality about it. It was in pencil, the outlines bold and rough, but here and there quite finished, as with an energy that would not be gainsaid.

It showed the side of a compartment—three *fauteuils*, the middle one filled with bags, portfolios, and wraps; the further one showing under the yellow oil-light the delicate, listless face of a man asleep—a man past the middle age, wrapped in a light dust overcoat; the near one occupied by a pale fair lady, unveiled, and with an intent look in her luminous eyes. She was sitting by the window, which was open, and there was the black night outside, with a star or two just defining the far range of low-lying French fields, through which one felt the train was passing with rocking motion and surd ceaseless murmur.

It was a sketch of Véra de Trekoff and her uncle on the night journey to Paris, and this dark foreground was Clifford's knee, with his sketch-book upon it, just precisely as he would have seen it for starting-point.

I felt to be in his place, and to be really looking into his lady's face.

What a strange young face it was!—full of decision and resolution, but with what a sadness, what a pallor, what a sleepless hunted gaze! What was she? who was she? Was she saint—sufferer—adventuress? Was she gaining—losing? She was suffering at any rate.

I sat down again, and pulled my arm-chair forward into the light. I could hear my pulse as my left hand supported my head. There was no other sound, save the occasional fall of a coal from the grate upon the hearth, as the fire burnt fiercer and brighter.

Against the next page there was a black cross. It had been traced on the margin, after the rest of the page was filled, and with a different ink; and the first lines were crossed over and blotted with this same darker ink, but I deciphered them for the sake of the context. They were in a strain

that jarred upon my thoughts, which had become unaccountably solemnised and so overstrung that I could fancy I heard a groan, from somewhere far off, as I began to read—the lightest strain of traveller's buoyancy.

. . . . .

'*Hotel Meurice, Paris. August* —. "*Tout vient à point à qui sait attendre.*" But must one always have such an aching under the knees before it? . . .

'Our journey is over, and we are in Paris. I have been in Paris half a dozen times, but never felt its charm—as home—before. Hitherto I have known nobody; bivouacked at an inn and gone to the play; breakfasted here and dined there; making myself a nest nowhere, and fancying I liked it. This time the incidents of life will be the same, and yet how different! We are here for work as well as play, and I have a nest! But there is the outside whirl of life running by, as our river ran at Basle, and I can plunge into it when I want diversion or excitement. It is rather Véra though, or the Count, who may need these occasional plunges, than I. The Count, it transpires, has a suite of rooms sky high, in a big house like a palace half way up the Champs Elysées, and

he has ordered them to be prepared for Véra and himself. I have "descended" here, where I have an old room, in the back part, looking out on the quiet but bustling court, with a little dressing-room behind it for my servant. I have friends here—decent invalidish English folk—who occupy one of the front *appartements* that command the lime-shaded gardens dotted with white caps of *bonnes* and the fancy dresses of children; and as my mother wishes me to see something of these folk, I have another reason for putting up here, for I shall be at my hotel little enough, and have no time for visiting. I am not near to Véra, but that is best. I shall thus have an excuse for a morning walk, which is perhaps the finest town walk in the world. Paris is suffocating after Switzerland; the streets and roofs white hot; and I shall be glad of exercise early and late.

'We arrived but a few hours ago, and as yet I have only tumbled out my drawing things upon the table—setting up a picture of Véra's face before me—and fallen to sleep upon my bed, regarding her in the queerly-patterned red light that comes in through the old figured window curtains. I was tired, but I have awakened fresh, and

here is a picture of my room, before I go and eat my dinner at the Count's.

'It has two windows, draped with the traditional white lace, through which one sees nothing, but which gives a room always such a restful, private air; and opposite to them it has the big old-fashioned wooden bed in a recess, where, being lazy, I am lying still, to write. Then there are the two short sides of the room, one of which holds the fireplace, with its indispensable stopped clock upon it—two white pillars and a foolish brassy face—and the other something between a sideboard and a cabinet, of marble and tarnished buhl—a thing of just that antiquity that has no charm or value, and which looks as if it may have held any number of rather squalid secrets in its day—idle love letters or soiled linen. Between the windows there stands another awkward press, taller and more portentous, but its want of lock or my carelessness in shutting it after looking into it just now, prevents its being as secretive. It is empty, all but piles of newspapers, and is waiting with a hungry vault-like air for my effects. It is naked, too, but for some worthless bit of alabaster under a glass case, with a *chenille* fringe

around it. The centre of the room is filled by a convenient table, which I could thank for hiding the carpet—sprawling its monster bunch of faded tulips and lilacs on a snuffy brown ground.

'There are two doors—one between the buhl cabinet and the window, to the left, which presumably leads into another room; and one at the foot of the bed, that leads out into the passage. I cannot see behind my head as I lie here, and I have no reason to think it worth my while to get up and look round. I have surely lived in this bedroom before, and I know it has no artistic surprises.

'Poor square room, with your much-used, much-abused furniture, covered with vague ornament—what strange stories you could tell if you had a voice, or rather if you had any meaning in those creaks of which you are not sparing! Your very presses bulge with confidences once hidden there, your very clock is silent for fear of telling secrets. I lie with this delightful drowsiness still on me, and picture some of your histories—with an Englishman's awakening only in a foreign land, for I never fancy things about the hotel rooms at home. In vision I can see my kinsfolk and acquaintance in this room under ridiculous, impossible circum-

stances. I can see them cursing the looking-glass because it is over the mantelshelf; though, stay, there is a concession to English taste in a dimity-hung little toilet table in one of the windows, draped with the stale, smirking air of some conscious venal bride of an hour, for every fresh arrival. I can fancy all absurd things happening here, until the bald-headed old glass case over the alabaster vase nearly splits itself with headache in looking on.

'I think I know the room before. But I can fancy no tragedy: it seems to have so much to say to me, and still to wait for more.

'It is the very room I slept in when I first crossed from England to begin my studies in Italy. What an untried world it told me about then! how I observed it! No wonder that its mean features force themselves upon me now, jeer at them how I may. The room recognises me again, and I feel that I could tell it my whole story. It is strange that I should be back in it now, when the lonely student life I started is so nearly at an end. I tossed upon this bed till I slept off my first haunting, gnawing sea-sickness. I recollect I was awakened at three in the morning by a ruddy young Scotsman, half seas over, who reeled home

from Valentino, and insisted that it was his room, until he struck a light, which sobered him; after which I heard his chum's voice from the passage, shouting "Tim," and he sheepishly took himself off to the floor above. I heard their smothered laughter and the thud of their boots as they flung them off upon the floor. And then the next day he was in the long-shaped slip of a reading-room off the courtyard below, with his broad back bent over the table of newspapers, as he looked down the wide sheet of the *Entr'acte* till his chum called "Tim" again, and Tim, glancing up, caught my eye, and we saw each other and laughed at the remembrance of the preceding small hours. I wonder if Tim is married, and whether he goes to Valentino any more.

'And then I was ill, and lay here for some days with a cold on me, and could hear my servant's voice clacking all day in default of the silent timepiece, as he talked with old friends, waiters, couriers, valets—in his room, separated from mine by this partition wall against the bed, alone. I shall hear it begin again presently I suppose, the words inaudible, the sound ceaseless, and only hushed at all when he is talking of me.

'Well! and now—you poor passenger's room, you bulging presses with loose locks at the service of all, you pseudo-corners that dare hide nothing because of momentary packings and unpackings, shelves that have not kept the place of my palettes and brushes sacred from cigar ends or medicine bottles, pillows that have given your unhomely rest to old heads aching with travelling and young heads aching with cards and wine—all you mute slaves that have proffered your services and comfort to any one that had ten francs to pay for it—you have got me back again at last, grateful, satisfied, *reconnaissant*. My life abroad began and ends in you.

'"Ends"—I don't like that word. I mean my life alone.

'*Midnight*.—Whereupon I dressed myself, and walked slowly, in the burning, sweltering heat, past the fountains, into the shade of the trees, and along from glowing gravel to staring pavement, till I reached the Count's house, where indeed a surprise awaited me. I remember noticing the big palace in old days, and wondering who could live in it. It seemed too vast and towny for a home. It stands in a white block of building, at the corner of

one of the left-hand streets, with its bright front and countless windows facing straight upon the splendid boulevard. It has its main entrance there, but it has another into the side street, and a little shop defaces that, stuck there like a postage stamp on the corner of a letter. The office-room of the *concierge*, under the arched *porte cochère*, which is the chief doorway, is fitted with electric bells, and has a thorough clockwork look about it. It is like a stockbroker's room, in its communication with the exchange, only the exchange to which this little lodge listens is the come and go of fashionable life.

'I was admitted, and went up, up, up, to the extreme top of it all, the velvet carpet annulling the sound of my footsteps.

'A royal princess lives upon the first floor, a royal churchman on the second; about the fifth floor it all ends—very near heaven indeed—at Véra's door, with its bell hanging beside it. And Véra's door is to see like the door into a sarcophagus, heavy with oak and bronze. It makes me think of Mrs. Chesterton—of all things monumental and impenetrable: but it is no more monumental and impenetrable than Mrs. Chesterton really is.

It opened to my touch of the bell at once, and I found myself in a billiard-room—for the *appartement* is a bachelor's, and all the space in it has been requisitioned—a square-shaped room, with low hanging lamps for the evening, but in this midsummer light left dim, and lit only by the small skylight above the table. The walls are lined with couches, and their surface, as well as the couches', is hung with gold embroidered Indian shawls.

'I was hardly prepared indeed for the *luxe* of this room, and still less for that of those which opened out of it, knowing as little of the extravagant life of Paris as most young artists who have just passed through it at intervals on their way to an Italian workshop, or to holidays at home in a quiet English town.

'The hangings over a door that led out of the billiard-room to the right were lifted by the Count's courier, who had admitted me, and I entered a small drawing-room furnished *en suite* in amber—an entrance room and containing little else than a grand piano and some upholstered chairs and sofas, such as one sees on the stage in a comedy of high life as the decoration of an interior. Through one of two doors in the left wall of this, draped also

with *portières* stiff with seed pearls and gold, I passed to the larger room, in which I found Véra.

'She was sitting at a writing-table beneath a high window which was filled with richly stained glass, and in her new surroundings she gave me an impression that was almost novel.

'The furniture was in deep red and gold, and the floor was strewn with furs which nearly hid the *parquet*. Every table except the one at which she was sitting was covered with flowers, and there was the smell of sandalwood and incense strong upon the air. One side of the room was nearly hidden by a great curtain of crimson on which golden dragons were worked, and she was herself wrapped in some garment that had oriental designs embroidered upon it. It was of a brickdust red, and wrought in gold, and she had bound over her fair hair, which was dressed lower and still more simply than usual, a little handkerchief of dull silk in the same colour. She was rather pale, and there were dark lines beneath her eyes.

'I came forward diffidently, for I feared that I disturbed her. She was not writing, but destroying some papers, and a brazier at which she was

burning them with some scented coal was adding to the drowsy heat of the atmosphere.

'She rose as I entered—looking taller than ever in her straight gown under the heavy gilt of the embossed ceiling—and put out her hand without turning towards me. "I am not dressed," she said. "I have been resting, and I wanted to arrange things here a little."

'"You are lovelier than ever," I said; "and I should have thought you were more royally dressed. I do not know your wardrobe yet."

'"I am in my dressing-gown," she said, without a smile.

'She was paler, yes—certainly paler, and preoccupied.

'"This is your home, Véra? It is like a fairy palace."

'"It is hideous," she answered curtly. "There are rich things in it, but there is nothing in good taste; you have taught me that already, though I don't know that I am the happier for knowing it."

'I could not contradict her: the rooms were laden with satin and velvet and gilding, and there was a want of air and freshness. She had made the apartment at the Three Kings Hotel a thou-

sand times prettier in a few hours, with her new-found artist skill.

'"Don't you miss that river, Clifford?" she said, and then she looked at me. "I think you do; you look ill."

'"I am not ill: the journey tired me, and I had a feverish restless sleep, but I awoke refreshed."

'"You do not look it: are you well housed?"

'"Yes, indeed, in my old room at Meurice's."

'"Your old room: is that good enough for you now?"

"Why not?"

'Her eyebrows twitched a little as she answered, "Oh! for the great painter that is to be—next year."

'We sat down. I asked her presently, "Where is the Count?" and for an instant I thought she looked vexed.

'"He is out; he will possibly not be back to dinner."

'"Véra!" I could not control my gladness.

'"Are you pleased?"

'"Véra!" was all I could say again.

'"Well, stupid boy, that means you are pleased, I suppose. I? Yes! O yes, I am pleased too. I shall not dress."

'I had come up close to her: she pushed me gently away, and back on to a long couch covered with dark soft plush, that was against the wall. It was one of those luxurious hateful couches that seem made only for idle and foolish people, but at the moment I was idle and foolish too, and I felt fitly suited with it. I leaned back and looked at her, as she glided, like a magician, in her flame-coloured robe, about the small full room. I seemed to feel my life flow and ebb as she went nearer or farther.

'"I miss the rushing river," she said still, and then she came and seated herself by my side.

'"After dinner," she said, "I will show you a room that I want to make my studio. There we shall never be disturbed. It is atop of everything, and one reaches it by another staircase that leads out into the Rue d'——. You can come to me that way, indeed, if you like."

'"Shall we be long in Paris?"

'"That is as you will."

'"Let us be married before the summer is over, and then we can pass our winter in Italy."

'"Yes, that would do." She spoke without shyness or special interest, in the tone in which one might consider any winter plan.

'"Véra, a hundred times over, do you love me?"

'"Clifford, once for the hundred times, I am half afraid so." And then with a sudden tender impulse she leaned back against the soft cushions and laid her cheek to mine.

'"I am beginning to think," she said, "that I love you too well to marry you."

'"Why?"

'"How can I tell? I feel it—my old answer. If I marry you, I become yours, you will be my master. Indeed I shall love you then, but there are other considerations."

'"How other considerations?"

'"There are two," she said, touching with her right hand the little finger and then the thumb of her left, in a graceful, childish action. "There is the little consideration, that in marrying you I lose myself."

'"No you don't; you gain me."

'"Ah, no indeed! I have got you now. It is if I give myself to you that I lose myself."

'"But I think". . .

'"But I *know*;" and again she laid her hand like a roseleaf to my lips.

'"Well, and then there is the big reason, the thumb?"

'"The thumb," with a grave yet half-unconscious gesture of assent and a little smile. But she did not say what the thumb signified; she said only, "Clifford, did it ever occur to you that I am as old as you are?"

'"You are as old as love, and as young as the morning."

'"Have you lived all your life, Clifford?"

'"I am only beginning to live it now."

'She made no comment on my random answers, as if asking the question was all that mattered; and then she added, pausing as if thinking the matter over, "At all events, I bring you wealth."

'"That is my one fear, my one sorrow," I answered her. "I do not want wealth, Véra. I have enough: a few hundreds a year suffice for me, and more than me. I would have them suffice for us both, only it is much to ask of you. You know I have no notion of your means. I see that you live softly and fare delicately. I know nothing else, but I presume—nay, more—I feel sure that in leaving your uncle you will gladly forego soft living and luxurious pleasures.

'She shook her head. "I cannot forego my wealth," she said; "it is my own, and I want to settle a considerable sum of it upon you. *I want to do well by you.*"

'"As God is above us," I said, "I will take nothing from you."

'"I have nothing but my wealth to give," she answered softly. . . .

'She has strange moments, my Véra. This seemed to her a moment of extreme humiliation, and yet she is giving up all her world for me. What have I, an artist, upon whose name indeed there is no stain, but who am richly endowed with nothing except earnestness in love and work, and my name's simple honour, that I should mate with this spoilt child of fortune?

But the moment passed; she lifted up her head, and passed her hand across her face, lifting it gently from my lips to hers, as if she would efface with my kiss, that lingered on it, the hard line—as of pain—that had drawn itself of a sudden about her mouth; and then she smiled just as of old, and said, "At all events, you will take from me—your dinner?"

'"Gratefully," I answered, laughing; and just

then that stiff *portière* behind us was stirred and lifted, showing an exquisitely appointed dining-table in what formed the third room of the suite. It is not a large room, and I daresay if I looked at it with an artistic and not an appetised regard I should find it also overcrowded and unsuitably arranged ; but its effect in the candlelight, while the setting sun still shone through illuminated glass upon its damask, its glass, its fruit, its flowers, was very soft and brilliant. The room is furnished in old oak and gold-stamped leather ; the chairs are in cloth of gold, and the hangings of deep velvet, gold-besprent. Besides, there are monstrous gilt candelabra on pedestals in the corners of the room and on the sideboards, which light it with an hundred crimson-shaded wax lights. It is the nest of a bird of Paradise, one would say, if like things built in like, but they do not; so perhaps one would more rightly recognise it as a faded bachelor's *sanctum*.

'There were two or three servants in waiting—the dyspeptic vassals of Paris, among whom Véra had more than ever her look of a tropical flower in that gleaming Syrian snood and loose red gown.

'We dined simply, but perfectly, and the wines

were delicate and rare, but when the servants were gone we fell upon our *bonbons* like children. Véra, indeed, had eaten little till then, and my appetite proved only an excitement that would not let me eat; but now she played with the *marrons glacés*, the sugared violets and roseleaves, the *fondants*, and the *petits fours*, finding me this and that which I "*must* eat, to feel at home," in compliance with a feminine theory which she has, that no woman is at home till she has dined in her dressing-gown, and no man till he has eaten dessert.

'Who would not have eaten my dessert to-night?

'Not the most dyspeptic or toothless philosopher could have refused such a martyrdom of his gums or his digestion.

'I must needs make a drawing of my Véra, in the flame-coloured robe and with a chestnut in her hand, a modern Eve, with a *bonbon* box instead of the tree of knowledge, and an ideal Siraudin for her serpent.

'There was no balcony over the river on which we could sit to take our coffee as at Basle. But there was an out-of-door surprise all the same.

'Our dining-room with its blinded prospect had made me forget that we were at the extreme top of the house; but the situation had been utilised by our wealthy host. Out of this room, to the right, a tiny stairway hidden in flowers and wax lights led through a transfigured trap-door up on to the roof, which was arched over with creeper-hid trellises, and spread with mats, and was furnished with the wicker chairs and china jars of an Italian *loggia*.

'Thither we climbed to the company of the stars and a music that was like the sea waves heard afar off, but which was really nothing more or less than the hum of Paris far below at our feet.

'It was a quaint place enough where we found ourselves—the zinc borders and minarets of the roof showing in the dusk like the trappings of some miniature Moorish palace, and the bright shawls and cushions on the gleaming floor completed the illusion.

'We walked to and fro for a few moments before seating ourselves: our area was limited, but we had the whole sky for our ceiling.

'To the left there was a little glass house, shel-

tered behind a coping, and to reach it we had to cross a mimic channel. It was only the conduit towards a water-pipe, to let off the rain, but with the flower-pots and the green shrubs at each side of it, it looked like the dry bed of a wayside brook.

'We stepped across it, and Véra opened the door into the little glass house. It was not a conservatory, but a photographer's studio!

'"This is one of my uncle's follies," she said, "this room. It is larger than you think, and I am going to have it for my summer painting-room."

'It is indeed not a little house but a big room, admirably suited to the purpose. It runs along all one side of the roof, protected by a balustrade, and it is arranged with blinds and shutters, so that one can regulate the light.

'The feeling that I had in finding myself there alone with Véra was one of intoxicating pleasure. The world seemed so absolutely left below us—we were so completely alone—although but a dozen steps out of a Parisian dining-room, which the servants were even now setting quickly to rights. Véra was thoughtful: she lit a couple of candles, and glanced along the room as if measuring its

capacity for a studio; but I could see that her thoughts were far away, and upon meeting my gaze she came back to herself with an effort.

'"Will it do?" she said.

'"It is charming! Véra, is it not nice to be here alone together?"

'"Yes." She gave me her hand.

'"It is so different, dear, to all my former life, though much of that has been spent among beautiful things. To be here alone with you, and to call you mine, it is like a dream."

'"It is different for me, too," she said thoughtfully, "although I have been often enough in this room—to be here with you, and to have you for my own."

'"Have you spent much time here?"

'"Yes, I have been photographed here all the morning sometimes, my life has been quite idle hitherto; how little you know of my life!"

'"Your life is yet to come," I said.

'She assented. "Yes, it is beginning: but for the past, Clifford, do you take all my past on trust?"

'"Of course I do: and you mine?"

'"Oh, yours," with a little laugh. "I know yours quite well. How well I know it! A young

man's past, what is it? A few habits, a few passions, a few *souvenirs*—what do they matter for you?"

'I was distressed. "I have but one habit," I said, "a painter's life; but one passion, which you have inspired; but one memory, your face when I first saw it; and though that is a memory for ever, there is no need that it should be so, for have I not *you*—you always?"

'"*Yes, if you will.*"

'Always that same submissive careless word!

'It was hot in the shut-up glass room, which had been steeped with sunlight all the burning day. We went out again upon the starlit leads, just as a servant brought our coffee and set it upon a little oriental table of mother-of-pearl in front of the wicker chairs.

'"How big Paris seems!" I said, presently. "This quiet, with that distant murmur, gives me a greater sense of the city's comprehensiveness than even the courtyard of the Grand Hotel."

'"I know what you mean: you recognise that Paris has room for so much."

'"Yes, it is like life."

'"Like a woman's life?" she said, gently.

'"Why not a man's?"

'"Oh! because it is fuller of contradictions and concealments."

'"I like contradictions. Véra, you are full of contradictions."

'"I daresay."

'"I hate concealments."

'"'Véra, you are full of concealments' you should say!"

'"God forbid!"

'"But it is so. Yes, indeed, I am a little symbol of this big Paris, and, like her, I grow. I have my calmer corners and my quiet moments near the stars, and these you know; but I have my disquiets too;—my *champs elysées* and my *quartier d'enfer*."

'"You will let me share your disquiets?"

'"No: I am going to put them by. To say the truth, they never have distressed me much. I feel that I outgrow them.

'"There are things that one cannot outgrow."

'"I do not think so. It is my creed—my hope."

'"And doubtless true for you," I said, half laughing. "The only things that no one can outgrow are things that could never have entered into your life."

'She looked at me with an intent and strange regard. "What sort of things?" she said.

'It was past ten o'clock: we heard the dyspeptic valet climbing to our sky parlour. "What is it?" she asked quickly, when he had reached the roof.

'"It is a gentleman who wishes to see Mademoiselle la Comtesse, if possible, for an instant."

'She rose up. "At this hour I am not at home," she said.

'The man did not flinch: for all answer he put a card into her hand.

'"You can bring him up in five minutes," she said, after a moment's pause when she had read it.

'As soon as he was gone she tore it, still standing up, into a hundred infinitesimal scraps, looking at me.

'I had risen too, and was standing close to her.

'"Come to-morrow, after breakfast," she said, without taking her eyes off me, and without moving. "Now go."

'I took her hand. "Kiss me," I said.

'She shook her head, as always.

'"Go, my dear," she said gently. "Indeed it is time you went, you look pale and ill."

'"It is you who are pale," I said.

'"I? That is nothing."

'I turned to go, stricken to the heart with I know not what fear. "Stay," she said quickly, and she took me along the roof to the trap-door. We went through it together, and instead of turning down the flower-decorated and carpeted stairway that led to the dining-room, she opened another door that gave upon a squalid stone flight, lit here and there with gas-jets. It was a strange wrong side to the luxurious life, and the quick *frou-frou* of her dress seemed to hurry me along the passage like a wave."

'"Go down there," she said, "and you will get out in the Rue d'——. It is the way by which our coffee came, and it will be directer for you than going through the *salons* again."

'"Véra, tell me the truth: you do not wish me to see your visitor."

'She nodded, but did not answer directly. "You have your hat?" she said.

'"Yes." We were standing at the top of the stairway.

'"Had you anything else."

'"Only a stick—and I can walk without a stick at present—and a *foulard* for my throat."

'"You are very patient and good," she said, and I thought that tears were in her eyes. Then with a sudden gesture she put up her hands to her head and removed the Syrian silk that was upon her scented hair. She put it hastily round my throat and knotted it under my coat.

'I was standing on the step below her. I put my arms round her waist as she stood there above me, tall and fair, the bright strands of loosened gold escaping—as she had unwound them from the handkerchief—and tangling in my fingers.

'"I should like to carry you away with me!" I said.

'"And I," she answered, knotting again the silk round my throat as she did so, "*I should like to draw this tighter and tighter, until I strangled you. I think that would be best.*"

'Then she turned from me hastily, and I groped my way downstairs, and went out upon the bare pavement by the servants' way, like a man knocked roughly to earth out of a dream of heaven.

'Homeward, down the long bare *boulevard*, and past the trees and the fountains, to my hotel, waiting for me with the trite comfort of its old stuff-

hung room full of so many a trivial dusty memory. . . .

'I have sent away my servant before writing thus late into the morning. The room next mine is occupied now, I suppose; for during the last half hour I have heard a valet unstrapping his master's portmanteaux, and giving imperious English orders to the accustomed *garçon*, who takes them with the ready meekness of a continental vassal, but does not seem to execute them to insular taste. The English valet has enlisted my servant—an Italian—as interpreter, or perhaps they are old friends. The greeting between them seems of a cordial nature, as between two couriers of different nations. I think I have heard that soldierly voice before. I trust indeed that I am not *en pays de connaissance*.

'And now to bed.

'I am chilly again, sad and dispirited, I know not why. The night perhaps has turned colder, or else I find it so, having thrown myself into a chair after my brisk walk, and sat the last hour or more without moving. To-day I must find out my mother's friends here. I have told Véra that I shall do so. She does not breakfast till

late in Paris, and I am not to be with her until between twelve and one, for our day's work in the arrangement of our studio.

'Ah! that is presumably my neighbour's voice: it also seems familiar to me in its full-toned measured accents of reserve—the voice of a man with a temper something more than uncertain.

'"A beastly room: never mind, it will do;" and then the soldierly valet's heavy tread as he withdraws without a good-night to his master.

'I suppose his room is the fellow to mine, and he is blind to its pitiful air and deaf to the pathos of its well-worn furniture.

'I hope I don't know him: I don't like the way in which he kicks off his boots: it is petulant, selfish, and vicious.

'I look out, I cannot see any stars. I fancy there must be a storm in the air. Not a star shining over my Véra now. I pray that God may look down through the clouds to be her guide and guard.

'I feel as confiding as a child, as orthodox as a school teacher. Here is my prayer-book left out on the table among my palettes and brushes.

'Let me try the old *sortes* of the Psalms for my lady and myself.

'Here is for me.

'My finger is on a very little verse. "*What profit is there in my blood, when I go down to the pit?*"

'Solemn enough indeed.

'And now for Véra.

'There is a bigger verse under my hand: "*Thou hast delivered my soul from death, and my feet from falling, that I may walk before God in the light of the living.*"

'That is well; very well.'

CHAPTER XIII.

'*August* 31.—I am ill. I have not slept well, and awake shivering even in this fierce weather. That first horrible text has been my nightmare—absurd! It is only a cold that I have caught upon the journey, and I need but rest myself this morning, to be all right for our studio-building after breakfast. Meanwhile my mother's friends must wait; and this poor old mom, my one comfort in Paris, must hold my feverishness and tossing as well as my happy secret, ay, and keep them for me till I come back from my lady's presence, where all such feverishness and tossing will give place to cool and rest!

'Meanwhile I cannot draw, or write letters; only, between the chill and the heat that is upon me, walk up and down the narrow area of my room, and put a random entry or two into this importunate little book. I shall have a fire lit, and try to doze again, now that my neighbour's splashing

and noisy dressing is finished, and his room has put on its daylight silence. He seems to have been having it swept and garnished carefully. . . .

'Have I slept, have I dreamed?

'I come to myself with no shock of awakening, but with just as it were the stab of a knife in my heart.

'I sit down again to my table to write, that I may be sure that at any rate I am not dreaming now. *I could hear Véra's voice in the next room*, and it was raised in contemptuous, imperious speech.

'"*À quoi bon?*" she was saying. "You are a gentleman; and for our sentiment it exists no longer; . . . give them to me."

'And then there was that familiar voice—Who's?—in its deeper tones answering something that I could not hear.

'After that, silence—which gave me time to feel pain.

'There is no doubt that I am awake now, at all events; and I can hear against my will the rustle of a dress in the adjoining room, the turning of a key, the opening of a drawer.

'*That* tone in Véra's voice, every note of which

I begin to know so well. There is its caressing music for me, its familiar lightness and gaiety for the Count, its cold clearness for Mrs. Chesterton, its charming insistence with her maid; as there was its proud deference to Prinz Ernst, and its half shy contempt and coldness for Lord Charles Carlton——

'Why have I written his name? It stands on the paper, like the doom-foretelling words upon the wall. It is Lord Charles Carlton who is in the next room with Véra. . . .

'I sat still, I would not budge to listen; it came to me, I did not seek it.

'It is impossible.

'Why?

'He is an old friend. Why should she not come to him?

'Perhaps it is to surprise me in some way they are here, in the next room to mine.

'No! I have heard those clear delicate tones too plainly.

'"I am very much obliged to you," she said; "you have done me a great service. It is not for my own sake that I have asked it." And then afterwards, "Henceforth we are to be—*what* to

each other?—strangers that grow friends? Good." And with that little laugh of hers, that makes my joy and can make my sorrow too—"I shall be proud of any friendship with you, Charles, that has its beginning in strangeness."

'It is no folly or fondness that brings her to him—may God forgive me the thought! There must have been some episode, some awkwardness.

'A confidence, a letter? She is folding something, and I hear the crackle of paper. . . . Oh! I could burst this door between us, that is so blind and deaf and dumb.

'And is that Véra's voice that rings out now, so clear and sweet, and with such a torrent of laughter, in some stupid slang phrases of French? "*Du Comte de Trekoff?*" she says. "*O j' me fiche de ça comm' de l'an quarante.*" He is laughing with her now: the friendship that has "begun in strangeness" has ripened fast: and then—Is it the throbbing of the world towards its end, like a tired engine, that I hear? or is it only the beating of this heart of mine?—the sound of a kiss blown from her finger tips, as she opens the door into the passage.

'The draught flings my own door ajar.

'I can hear her distinctly, I can see her graceful figure as she stands with her back towards me.

'She is all clad in some dark heavy stuff, and closely veiled—the wafting towards me of that perfume as of lilac bloom and daphne—it is she; it *was* she; for she is gone.

'I still hear her voice at the end of the passage, as she turns to go downstairs: "Certainly not," she says in French, "my carriage awaits me at the corner—*à bientôt.*"

"*À tantôt,*" he says, and I do not stir yet. He shall see me, if he will, through my open door as he returns to his room.

'He does not return: he stays whistling in the passage a few moments, till the light sound of her footsteps has quite ceased, and then he crosses the corridor to go to the apartments at the other side of the hotel.

'My hand has travelled automatically over the paper, as I have clutched it in the desperate attempt not to go towards the door, not to listen.

'Here is the register of this last hour.

'Has God such a book?

'Does He misunderstand, as I do?

'I look at my watch; it is the hour when she

knew I was to have been visiting my mother's friends. In another hour I am due in the Champs Elysées. It is breakfast time, but to eat is out of the question.

'I am in a burning fever.

'I will go to Véra. It is not possible that she can have been here unattended, alone. I should not believe it, were it not that the record stands here in my own right of hand. What of that? My writing against her integrity? I will never trust that witness.

'I go to my door, to close it.

'I look out.

'My valet's room is wide open and empty.

'I will thank God, at least, upon my knees, before I go to her, that no human soul but mine has known of this.'

. . . . . .

I turned the page, deeply moved. The writing was blurred and hasty. It was the writing of a man who scarcely guides his pen. I had to draw the lamp still closer to me to read it.

When I did so I saw that it was burning low. I wound it till it gurgled with a sound as of pain and a cry—then I stopped.

Was that the lamp? It was like a human soul's escaping.

There was deep silence; it was cold. 'Psha! I am as nervous as poor Clifford was in Paris,' I said to myself. I must go to him soon, but first I must see the end of this adventure.

I turned the page—nothing but scribbling—drawing—lines up and down, as in the other sketch-book; no coherent writing. I turned on to the page that had attracted my attention, and driven away my inclination for sleep.

It was written carefully, with pains.

It was not a mere evening entry in the book, it was a record written when the paroxysm had passed, and of very few pages in length.

'*Calais, September* —.—I write this at the inn where I am to rest a night before crossing, because they tell me that the crossing may be my death, and somewhere I must set down my burthen, and look it in the face before I die.

'This is the place to do it—this old-fashioned, large-roomed, half-deserted hostelry, where at last I have found quiet lodgment. I will write it straight on from my last pause.

'The sermon has no text, or rather one text may serve as well as another.

'In my illness I remember opening a volume of modern English verse, which was picturesque, and which I had with me with a view to painting some incident that was sung in it, and I came upon the words:

All over, the celestial sign has failed! . . .

I forget the context.

'I forget even the line's meaning, but it haunts me and will do well enough for my record's heading.

'That day I went straight out of my room, and on, still shivering, into the hot tropical air. There had been a storm before dawn, and the weather was like a cloud of steam about one.

'My head was dull and I could not see; my heart beat thick and fast; there was a tingling in my senses, there was a cloud over my eyes. Something was wrong with me. I walked on like a drunken man.

'I reached the house. I felt I could not face the *concierge*. I knew not why.

'I went round to the little shop in the side street, was admitted without question by the ser-

vants' way, and climbed, with an instinct that I could not explain, up and up to the very top of all (the height whence I was to fall so quickly), and out upon the roof.

'It was clear air there, and I could breathe better; but to ascend those stairs had been already almost more than I could bear. I flung myself down upon a seat and waited. My heart-beats were strangled.

'As once before, I knew that she would come.

'The sun was still at its height in the heavens, the silence of the afternoon was on the place. In my mind I knew it was only the leads of a roof, but to my darkened sense it was like an enchanted garden.

'I remember having only one wish in my heart, to die before she came; but God, though He be righteous and do well, is not merciful always.

'I waited, and I heard the rustle of her dress presently as she came out, singing a little song.

'She was all white and silver, like a creature dew-bathed in the last August day; her face was grave as with the prescience of something sweet or sad that was to come. That face was like a flower's face: she was all lovely life and health;

she *seemed the incarnation of my own soul coming towards me, radiant and renewed.*

'I think I rose, and I know I had to grasp at something for support.

'"Clifford!" she said softly, surprised; "what is it?"

'I could not answer, something stifled me. I heard her ask if I was ill, and she looked into my face with a tender calm concern that I half resented.

'"Where have you been?" I said at last.

'Each word seemed the lifting of a ton's weight from my chest, only to let it fall again and crush me.

'And then I think she saw the game was lost.

'Scarcely angry, scarcely startled, she showed neither shame nor shyness; only she stood there very thoughtful, close to me—but had not touched me yet.

'"Do you wish me to tell you?" she said.

'"No," I answered her. "I know."

'And then we were both silent, and the sun stood still, I think—only the world spun round. The end was come.

'"It was for your sake," she said, presently.

'"What was?" I asked her; for God knows until that instant I had dared fathom none of my loss—none of my sorrow.

'"You had given me all," she answered, gently. "Should I not have given you myself? Why should you have known? But it is better, I think—we have no secrets now."

'Again I could not speak, and she mistook my silence. She went on:

'"It was too late to begin to make secrets, Clifford. Why should I have tried? You would have it thus. . . . I never deceived you. I have deceived no one; you have deceived yourself. I have never cared for the world's word. I do not care now. The world will yet be at my feet, but never you again."

'And then after a long pause, during which I heard nothing, the words came to me very clearly spoken. "It is as it always was. You will have no recompense. You have given me your life. I can only thank you."

'Then she drew from her breast two or three old letters, and she held them out to me to take.

'I did not take them. I saw they were directed to Lord Charles Carlton.

'"They are not mine," I answered, slowly. "Keep them."

'I put them from me.

'But I looked at them, and I looked once more at her, and this time my eyes were opened that I knew her.

'Of a sudden I felt through heart and brain an ideal clearness of sight. It seemed as if the world, with all its fog, receded, and left us two standing together there alone. The veil was lifted —rent. I saw that the gold of her hair was tarnished, that the rose of her lips was false; that she was not Life, but Death. I saw that we were standing on the tricked-out leads of a Parisian house. I saw that it was all a lie: I saw the truth.

'I reached out my arms towards her.

'I felt a tide rise in my chest, from my very heart as it were, that was salt as the bursting brine of tears.

'I tottered forward.

'She, too, stretched out her arms.

'I remember that where the dress was parted over her fair white throat—where the letters that should give my life the lie had lain, there was a cluster of leaves bound together with a bright

hard turquoise, the symbol of success—the blue of it haunts me yet, like an evil eye.

'And then—then—even as Lucifer, that fell to hell from heaven, must in that fall alone have felt quite that it was heaven he had lost—I felt her hands about my body, I felt her breast beneath my lips, and all her white and rose and silver was stained to scarlet with my blood, as I tumbled forward like a senseless life-drained thing into the arms at last of a woman—that was a sinner. . . .

'My God, my God! be merciful to her! She did for the best.

'Is she not—as I once wrote of her, and for all that she be as the dust of the streets, as the weed of the wilderness—"truth's very self"—Véra?

'Beautiful, O God!

'I do not know what passed.

'After that supreme moment I remember nothing more, except a long long dream, which gradually brought me back to life.

'I dreamed that we were walking together in a street that ended in a city all of blue, a world of turquoise glory—and that we came to an open grave.

'And it seemed to me as if I lay down in it,

that she might pass over without scathe into the blue city alone. And then it was I suppose that they laid me in my bed, in that poor tawdry hotel room that knew the beginning and the end of my secret.

'I have not seen her since. I do not know how it is with her, but in my heart of hearts I am persuaded utterly that it is well. . . .

'I lay there many days ill, not specially with any fever, nor did the hæmorrhage occur again. My life had spent itself in that one flow.

'Gradually I got better.

'I heard that she sent daily to inquire for me, that the strengthening things that I had taken and the flowers that were in my room, were hers; but she never came. I know she forgets easily.

'I let her go, and in letting her go from me I have saved my life, I think—if it be worth saving. But not being *hers* any longer, it is not worth saving. "Let her take it all," I become tempted to say. Could she come to me but once, and could I breathe my life out on her lips, my mission would be done.

'I have something yet left to give her—my soul.

'Let me guess at her life—I do not dare write my conclusions.

'Beautiful, rich, and an orphan, she must have been scarcely more than a child when she met Charles Carlton. I know how fragile she was, how fanciful.

'I suppose it was passion.

'I do not think it was love.

'What followed? I see her life before me as an open book, but when I approach it my hand recoils, my sight grows dim. What have I to do with *that* Véra? She was not *my* Véra then.

'Of the Comte de Trekoff, and of her relationship with him, I do not dare think either. Of one thing I am certain now, that she will leave him.

'Let silence cover the past. She would say "she has outgrown all that," and if I have helped her to do so, my life has sufficed. The rest I leave to God. If she foregoes the evil of her ways, what does it matter what becomes of me? This is my attitude.

'At last I left my bed. At last I saw that the web of my life was not broken; that it had only strained itself and fallen loose awhile, all tangled and soiled and marred. There was no end to it.

There is no end to anything on earth. I must take up the threads again, and go on trusting in the end to bring it to a perfect work.

'But I took up the threads sadly. "What profit was there in my life?"

'So I wrote to Véra, and asked her humbly to come to me. The past was past, I said, and I felt as I sealed the note that my death warrant was signed indeed.

'Then came a respite, but a respite of what agony and dread! My servant had but just left me with that letter when a telegram was brought to me from England.

'I had imagined there was nothing that could rouse me: I was indeed mistaken. I opened the flimsy message that could carry words that had a world's weight in them to wound me, and I read just this from my mother's maid: "Sir, she is sinking fast; come home without delay!"

'My mother!

'For a moment I was as a wild beast in a den, mad with the horror and the dread of it: the room was like a prison.

'Then an icy calm stole over me. I felt this—"*I was saved.*" But it was life for life.

'I do not think I have since felt one single throb or pain.

'When my servant returned, he was surprised to find me packing. I had previously shown no sign of interest in anything. I told him my news, and that I must start for England at once. And only then he gave me two letters from my mother which had lain unopened at my side during my illness. One was directed to the care of her friends who were here, and was to be given to me on arrival. As I never went to see them they did not hear at once that I was come. When they did know of it, after my illness, they were on the verge of departure. In that letter she wrote that she had been for some days unwell.

'In the other, written to me three days ago, she tells me she has just heard from her friends that I am ill, and she lays aside her own weariness to write to me—beloved heart!—but the writing trembles a little.

'That letter came a whole two days ago, but I was too listless to open it; and now I know it is too late.

'We finished packing, and I have got as far as

this on my road home, before I dare think of Véra. Now that I have set six hours of rail between us, I feel that there is no hurry—I know that there is loss in store for me. I have even a rebellious mind not to be entrapped away from my fate by this working of Providence; and yet I will not let my mother's death be vain. For I believe that she will die. I believe that in going to her I but postpone the end.

'Well! even so. I cannot, with this numbing sense of her loss upon me, go headlong out, and do the very thing that her whole life would have protested against, although perhaps her death allows.

'I am to sleep here to-night.

'There was to be a telegram at the station for me if the need of my coming was urgent, but I found none. I stay here, therefore, for the necessary rest, but I am not reassured.

'It is a queer enough place where I find myself, like a mock palace. With my old trick of noticing detail, I have observed it all; and with my new experience have read a fresh meaning into its tinsel garishness and faded hues. The wall is covered with white lace stuck over stained green

paper and varnished. The look-out is into a squalid square courtyard, filled with lumber and vegetable refuse.

'My valet is gone to see if there is any telegram. The night is very hot and still, the air of the room close. I have set the window open. I can hear the silence. I am cool again. I believe if I never saw Véra more that my health would right itself; but my art—my illusions—these are gone from me for ever. I shall see henceforth only the wrong side of things. If I summon her back to me, I shall know that I am summoning not even any longer an illusion, but an open shame. She is my health no longer, but my curse. There is left only the kiss she never gave me, to bring me down "to the pit." . . .

'My servant brings me back a telegram: it runs as follows: "If you are ill, come at your leisure." My dear, dear mother! patient and forbearing to the last.

'But it is not from her.

'Well, what then?

'She was perhaps asleep.

'I must sleep too. I will take a dose of chloral and fling myself upon my bed till morning. I am

sensible of such calm that I feel sleep will come to me, and with it healing.

'I have drunk the draught, and am awaiting its effect to lull me out of my thoughts. As it mounts to my brain I am dizzy with waves of nothingness that steal over my mind, annulling care. I ask myself, as if I were another, "Is my mother dead or living?" I recall her as if she belonged to the past already—her unfailing care of me, her devotion, her purity of life, her meek and saintly beauty. I recall the lap on which I nestled as a babe, the look that was my rightness as a boy, the smile that was my blessing as a man; how she nurtured, cherished, and approved me; how she believed in me, and hoped for me, and loved me; how I was the light of her eyes and the joy of her heart; and I do not weep—I smile.

'And then the wave of nothingness sweeps over me again, and I recall what has parted me from her for ever.

'I see again, but as it were behind a veil, as sleep is stealing over me, Véra de Trekoff, to whom I too have given up my life, for whom I shall have to "go down to the pit." I see again the tall fair

height of her, the gentle easy breathing, the white arms, the face that was my heaven.

'And I know it is all a lie; and, knowing that, still I do not weep—I smile.

'Why?

'Because in my heart of hearts I feel that Love is all the truth of things—that their transfiguration is in its gift; that even as my mother for me, so I for Véra must indeed "spare not mine own soul."

'Mother, forgive me! sanction the gift. Let the life that was thine in me pass verily from me to her.

'Grant me but strength to summon her once yet, to breathe at last thy blessing with my soul into her lips, in the one kiss alone that shall be hers and mine, that we may cast out the power of evil, and by the power of our love deliver indeed "her soul from death, and her feet from falling; that she may walk before God in the light of the living."

'Again this wave of nothingness. . . . my mother! . . . Véra! . . .'

I closed the book, my eyes were blind with

tears, and I felt that the story of my poor friend's life was read.

What was to be the end? for I could pursue the sequel thus far. He had come back too late; the 'come at your leisure' of that telegram meant not indeed that there was time, but that there was eternity, to spare.

It must have been more than two months ago that he returned to England, and to a certain extent he had recovered, although he had lost his hold upon his art, and had got instead only that cruel insight into the wrong side of things that I had heard exemplified in his talk that very day. He had sought pure air here, and found it; he had sought my friendship again, and indeed he had found that, he had sought peace perhaps—had he found that? and why had he summoned me for this mysterious confidence.

Was he on the verge of seeing Véra again? on the verge of completing that strange self-surrender which her being exacted of his?

And then the thought flashed through me—What if he *had* seen her? What if that fair dusky-robed figure, that I had seen outside in the November starlight, were indeed none other than hers?

I rose. The electric understanding had come upon me with such force that I could sit still no longer.

All pointed to one conclusion.

I looked round; the fire was out; there was no draught in the room to carry off the lingering scent of the heavy flowers, her typical flowers, upon the chill night air.

The hour was late, and the lamp again was burning low.

I pursued my train of thought, or rather it plunged along to its goal despite of me, till a great awe and horror fell upon me.

The silence about me was not the silence of rest and hush; it was the silence of something with a secret waiting to declare it.

I took up Clifford's watch: it told the hour but just eleven.

I detached the key from the chain and locked up his books again in the old cabinet, presided over by the ivory 'Silence,' finger on lip. I felt my muscles brace themselves as with steel. Presently I looked at the watch again, after playing awhile with the seals, among which was a small locket containing hair, perhaps the hair of that woman's

mother that she had thrown as a stake at *écarté*.

It was still only eleven.

I hesitated: the watch had stopped. I consulted my own: it was just upon midnight. Then, indeed, I had out-stayed the hour when Clifford bade me be with him.

I put out the lamp, took his watch in my hand, and ran hurriedly upstairs, past the dim studio, where the dark showed her picture like a coffin lid against the wall, and across the narrow passage into Clifford's room.

As I tapped at the door, I heard a clock strike downstairs, and then another outside, and then farther off still deeper tones upon the clear keen air.

No doubt midnight was just past—it was the turn of the morning!

I did not hear his answer to my knock; he was perhaps asleep.

I stole into the room, to set down the watch by his pillow.

The moonlight streamed out of the frosty night, through the unshrouded window, on to his face, as he lay sleeping.

Sleeping indeed—I knew before I touched him what sleep it was he slept. I knelt down beside him and laid my hand on his: it was almost cold with the icy coldness that falls on a man's pulses only once for all.

I ache yet with the touch of it. His brave pitiful face, full of such noble things undone, was turned in patient silence upward to the stars. Like a tiny streak of silver in the moonlight, was a gossamer line that went from his left hand to his fast-closed lips: it was the long gleaming thread of a woman's golden hair.

The story of his life had become mine, the load was shifted, but too late for help; and I came up with my counsel scarcely formed, my word of worldly wisdom yet unspoken, to find that Love had outrun me in the race, that the kiss was given, the bond sealed for ever—that her secret was safe, and that Clifford Gray lay dead in his youth and manhood, with one fairy thread of gold—that the first breath would rob him of and the first flame annul—for all reward and profit of his life.

Nay! not for all reward. I looked long at him

as he lay there in his lonely death, and I knew that he had overcome, that the night was indeed past; that with his soul, as with the day, it was hard upon morning.

After that, lights, confusion, clamour, hireling sorrow: the story told.

CHAPTER XIV.

IT all happened several months ago, and there was a great deal incidental to my poor friend's death that was very distressing. But he had long lived out of sight of his friends, and there was nobody to make much ado over him except me. Those who did know him, knew of his serious illness in Paris, and there was nothing in the manner of his death to cause surprise when it was viewed in reference to his having broken a blood-vessel on the lungs some three months previously.

In accordance with a will he had made just six weeks before his death, I had to forward to Mlle. de Trekoff everything of value that he possessed, with the exception of some trifling legacies, among which I found I was to have his watch and chain, and the inlaid cabinet 'with its contents,' a legacy full of associations now that could only serve to rouse and keep alive indignant sorrow.

All his pictures were left to her, as well as his small fortune, 'as her very own, and to do with just as she would.'

I never saw Clifford's heiress. The Comte de Trekoff acted for her, and 'in view of the circumstances,' as he explained to my lawyer, she did not even pay my friend the final visit of ceremony, which I had hoped, when I looked at his beautiful calm face, would have been a strong spur to good for one of so receptive and imaginative a nature. This, his last gift of all, she never cared to take. He went down to his grave unwept, and almost unattended.

Afterwards, being myself idle and out of health, I went to Italy for Christmas time, part of my object in going there being to carry out some instructions in Clifford's will regarding his old studio in Florence, and to make provision for his landlady there and her daughter. I liked the studio, and ultimately took it as a *gîte* for myself, being anxious to arrange matters finally with Comte de Trekoff, and finding some difficulty in letting it as Clifford's will left directions that it should be let.

When the Count heard that I proposed to take it on my own account, he gracefully gave orders—

which he did not even hint were of Véra's suggestion—that it should be left quite as it was when Clifford had occupied it, and nothing be taken out of it. I therefore forwarded him a cheque through my solicitor for the few pictures, bits of furniture, and old stuffs that I found there, as valued by an agent, and thus I had the privilege of securing some beautiful samples of his earlier work.

I did not return to town till the end of April, when I dislike to be away, and so to miss the first view vouchsafed me of the spring pictures. I was the more determined not to miss that, in the season following Clifford's death, because I had heard on good authority that his portrait of Mlle. de Trekoff was to be exhibited at the Royal Academy. It was not only spoken of generally as amongst probable pictures, but had already been ardently admired by certain privileged critics.

I arrived in London only the night before the Private View, for which an artist friend had as usual secured me a card ; and owing to the one thing and another that had to be done before I was free, it was full afternoon before I could present myself at Burlington House.

I walked slowly up the big staircase, with

mixed personal feelings of exhilaration and regret.

I felt certain that poor Clifford's picture would have a great success. I was equally certain that no praise or blame could touch him now, and I felt something of what he had said himself about the hollowness of things and their coming too late.

In the vestibule I met at once many friends, and anxious to give Clifford's picture my first attention, I asked one of them where it was hanging, but he was so occupied with the subject of it that I only got a Chinese answer.

'Ah, Frank!' he said; "then you *can* tell us about her. Who is she? They say she is a Russian, and that he was in love with her. I beg your pardon, old fellow,' he added hastily, 'but I forget that you were such a friend of his.'

'I believe that Mlle. de Trekoff is a Russian, if you mean her,' I replied coldly; 'but I know nothing of her.'

'Nothing of her!' he said. 'Why all London knows some different story—her Niagara cloak—her crystallised chameleon, all these things we know, but we don't yet know about her influence on Clifford Gray. I suppose that was a trifle? eh?'

'I suppose so,' I answered, sick at heart at this light mention of the things that had entered so strangely into my poor friend's diary. 'There are some people to whom life and death are trifles.'

'Ah, I see!' (He did not see. He is a peripatetic note of interrogation, and never waits for a reply.) 'Well, what is *not* a trifle, is that she is here.'

'Here?'

After all it was not strange: it was her own portrait that was being exhibited, but I had rather she had kept away.

'Yes, *here*; and if I stay talking longer I shall not see her. (He forgot that it was he who had been detaining me.) 'She is not shy, and so I suppose she will be near her picture.'

And thus following him, I gathered indirectly where the picture was.

We crossed the sculpture gallery, turned through the crowded rooms on the left, where the fanciful dresses of the visitors, as they stood grouped together chatting and resting, quite obscured the pictures, and came out into the big third room, where we saw straight opposite to us a small crowd of critical and excited people.

'There is the portrait,' said my volatile acquaintance carelessly; and in another moment he was off through the opposite door, in the direction whither the eyes of every one who was not looking at the pictures turned.

'That was she that passed,' I heard an artist say close by me. I knew whom he meant, and glancing across I saw Véra de Trekoff—I was sure at once that it was she—standing in a knot of people in the farther room, exquisitely dressed in some fresh light garb, and with a cluster of half-drooping roses on her shoulder.

She was surrounded by many admirers, and some one was already presenting my inquisitive friend. I saw that she was speaking very fast, and could just tell that her every gesture was expressive. But I felt no inclination to look at her, and as some one made way at that moment I found myself standing with more curiosity before her pictured image, the one with the spinning wheel, of which Clifford had made casual mention to me at Norwood as 'typical.'

I am ill at describing paintings, but this one made a profound impression upon me. I had imagined a conventional life-size portrait of a

woman in evening dress, seated before a wheel, and in that sort of portrait I could fancy nothing of much value, artistically considered: I was not prepared for the small canvas on which I found my gaze was concentrated. The simple mechanism of the wheel, which was of old-fashioned workmanship,—half wheel, half loom,—came right across the picture. Her arms were twined about it, as if busied with the toil; behind it her face looked out at us—across us—through us—into the far-distant, the future; and the drapery of what one could see of the figure was gorgeous and fantastic.

It was a very curious picture, but quite unaffected; the master's brush had painted just literally what the master's eye had seen: it was not the fault of brush or painter if there was all hell and all heaven in the woman's face.

Although perhaps none but me knew the history of the picture, it had taken hold of people's attention strongly; it was so original; the face so beautiful; the occupation so symbolic. I noticed that the colouring, however forcible, was crude and the texture rough in comparison with Clifford's later work, but the impression was made all the same. The picture was broadly framed, with

chameleons in queer twisted attitudes, carved in the corners and bronzed. On one corner of the canvas was roughly painted, 'To Véra de Trekoff. Clifford Gray.'

I stood before it as one stands before an urn in which is buried all that was a man; the clear eyes kept their secret.

I had been surprised at the concourse of people before the picture, but presently, from their not pressing me, I became aware that their attention was divided between this painting and a pendant to it hung but two paces off. The crowd that I had imagined were awaiting their turn before Véra's portrait were really more intent upon this other. I pushed on with them, and, lifting up my eyes, saw that poor Clifford's picture was indeed outrivalled—and by his own image!

For, hanging on the same line with his work, in what was a place of higher honour, was the very picture that he described in his book—the portrait of himself painted at Basle by Véra de Trekoff, in remembrance of their first moments at Luzern, 'alone together.'

And what a significance it had for me now!

This picture also was smaller than I had ex-

pected; it was only half length like the other, and framed in the same strange fashion, save that on the broad grained gilt of this there were the insignia of death instead of the graven lizards, and there were marigolds too carved upon the frame —*souci!*

The figure of my friend seemed standing close to me, in his light morning suit, and was full of character, while the light and shadow about him, the translucent sun-steeped lake seen beyond the black wooden props, the quaint old designs on the panelling, with their vague German legend—all the detail, all the significance, all the pathos in the treatment of minute and common things, surprised me into praise that was as keen as pain.

The picture was entitled in the catalogue, '*Mon Maître* . . . Véra de Trekoff.'

'My Master!' irony of the title, which should more fitly have been 'my slave!'

I got quite near the picture, and regardless of the pressure of the crowd I looked into Clifford's face again, as if it had indeed been the face of a friend; the low broad brow, the deep-set loving eyes, the cheek a little pale and hollow, the growth of the hair shading the texture of the skin, the fine

expansive nostril, the sensitive sweet mouth, the dimple in the darkened chin, the throat in broader shadow beneath it, the curve of the face to the ear —yes! it was he indeed, and above all there was his tenderest expression, the look of a wounded creature, brave and patient, till to meet it even on the canvas filled my eyes with tears. Then the strong sinewy artist hand, grasping the bridge—with what fidelity it was rendered, with what devilry the limbs were shown through the well-hung coat! It was wrought as by who should say, 'All this went to make my master, and all this is mine; or, if not mine, then Death's, who is my minister.'

At last I turned away, my feelings centring into one—revolt. How could she have exhibited him there, with the crossbones gilt about him, and the Dance of Death above?

As I strolled away I was aware of the comments all around me, each one of praise.

'Véra de Trekoff,' a lady acquaintance of mine was saying. 'I don't know the name. O yes, surely she painted that other picture—the pair to it—a woman?'

I could not resist setting her right; many were

falling into the same mistake, as people will into the most flagrant and stupid error.

'That other painting of *hers*,' I heard an artist say, 'is evidently an earlier work.'

'It is not hers,' said my acquaintance, passing on my explanation; 'it is her master's.'

'Her master's!' he answered; 'her pupil's, you should say: this picture is a hundred times more masterly than the other; it is like something of Bastien Lepage; the other is comparatively student's work.'

Was it so indeed? was the battle to be to the strong even here?

'Who is the man?' another lady was asking.

'*Monsieur Maître*,' said her friend, fatuously, referring to the catalogue.

'Who's *Monsieur Maître*?'

'I'm sure I don't know; some fancy of Mlle. de Trekoff's, I suppose!'

'It isn't *Monsieur Maître*, child; it's *Mon Maître*.'

'What does she mean by that?'

'How on earth can I tell?' Then whispers and light irritating laughter, blown about like dust.

'It is the portrait of poor Clifford Gray,' I said

to a friend, in rather a loud tone for their behoof; and then there was a murmur *sotto voce*, 'Who was Clifford Gray?'

'Oh! the man that painted that?'

'Who is that?'

'Who? why Véra de Trekoff.

'Oh! so it is; what a lovely gown!'

'And what eyes!'

'She looks *done up* though.'

'*But* so lovely.'

'They say she's here.'

'Here! where? let us find her.' And they were off in her wake, without another thought of Clifford.

I stood between the two pictures with an infinite sadness upon me. Change and care!

She had robbed him of his honours even in death.

It was a fair victory, one might say, but in my heart I did not find it so. She had taken his shield and sword and spear; had gotten to herself his teaching, his experience, his skill; and they had hung the pictures side by side for her superb successful vanity. It made me disbelieve in God, and my heart was hot against her.

And then I thought of Clifford's grave, far away in the Hampshire village by the sea, where I had lain him in winter frosts by his mother's side; his eyes and ears closed to this world's panoply and praise while the grass should wave above him and the strong sea winds blow.

It was better so, but I would fain have guarded him his artistic heritage.

It was not to be, it had all passed to this woman; she had indeed entered the turquoise city of success.

I was still standing stupidly listening to the empty words, in the heated air about me, which seemed to be like busy insects eating the daisies from the turf that should have covered him with the honours of their blossom, when my inquisitive friend came panting up to me a second time.

'Well, old man,' he said breathlessly, 'I've got you something.'

'What do you mean?' I asked him.

'Only this, that Mlle. de Trekoff wants me to bring you to her party on Saturday.'

'I don't know her,' I rejoined hesitating.

'Don't know her? of course you don't, or you'd have *affiché* it long ago; however she knows

you; I told her I had just left a friend of her model's.'

'You said that to her?'—I cried out, as if he had hurt me—I was so aghast at the pain he must have caused her—'What did she do to you?'

'Do to me? why she smiled, and said she was glad that I had recognised Mr. Gray's portrait.'

I felt a burning indignation, a keen curiosity. The one cast out the other: and surely such a woman was not worth righteous anger; but I looked back at the picture she had painted, and I felt there was the germ of genius there; where there is genius there should be at least capacity to suffer.

My friend went on with his narrative.

'Yes! I told her I had just left a friend of Clifford Gray's, and then I explained you, and she said that her uncle had once had some business communications with you.'

'She said that?'

'She did; was it not true?'

'Quite true.'

'And that she would like to make your acquaintance if I would bring you next Saturday.'

'Where does she live?'

'Why, the man is as ignorant as a savage—at Claridge's. of course!'

'Why, of course?'

'She has been staying there the last three weeks, and the town talks of nothing else.'

'What does it say of her?'

'What not?'

'Well, you must tell me all: I want to see no more pictures, and no more people; walk back with me along Piccadilly to my hotel.'

So Véra de Trekoff being gone already, and with her his attraction, he came out of the Academy with me.

As we went along he told me what London knew of her, which was formulated thus. She was the orphan niece of Comte de Trekoff, a Russian noble of almost fabulous wealth; she had royal blood in her veins, nothing was too select for her, nothing too distinguished. Her uncle had been her father's heir; she was not only to a large extent her father's heiress, but was to be her uncle's. This was not her first visit to England, nor was she in the matter of years a *debutante*; she had been partly educated here, and had spent some time as a child with a wealthy old maiden connection

of hers, in whom I recognised the chameleon's mistress. She had been educated further at a convent near Bristol. There had been a story of her engagement with one of the Durhams—it was here that Lord Charles Carlton came into the story. That had been broken off, or, people said, postponed, for there was a whisper that he was to appear at her party on Saturday as her affianced husband: he was still in her train.

'Romances in her life? Oh, no doubt, a thousand; there was that young painter for one last year, you knew of that—they were all nothing; but Charlie Carlton was the favourite.'

I could hardly believe my ears; had she indeed been quite unmoved by poor Clifford's tragic history, by all his loss and all her gain? I felt in me a thrill, which God forbid that any man should ever feel about a woman again—that I held the key of her secret: but to what end? Did not Charles Carlton know that secret? was not he the beginning of it all: and, if she married him, what business was it of mine? Only, to think that Clifford's life and death should be but a fresh gem, pure as a diamond, in the marriage coronet of a fop? Was it to this end that he had

spent his life upon her, to this profit that he had 'gone down into the pit'? My heart seemed turned to stone.

As we strolled along Piccadilly together towards the Park (for I had put up at the Alexandra Hotel), my friend continually interrupted his recital to show me this new beauty or that, and as we waited at Apsley House to let some people drive by, a carriage passed quite close to us, the sight of which made him hastily grip my arm. 'It is Véra de Trekoff,' I heard a man say behind me at the same instant.

In a moment, and as I had half anticipated, all my previous fancies about her were undone. She was leaning back in her victoria, as the carriage turned into the Park; a handsome man, just past the middle age, was at her side. His face was inscrutable, impassive, while the play of expression upon hers was like the flicker of summer leaf-shadows upon marble. She was thoughtful, her face—so exceedingly fair that it was like porcelain rather than anything of flesh and blood—quite grave and pale under her parasol of ruby beads and feathers. The hat, too, that shaded her face was of many tints of red, while her fresh dress of

ivory laces was almost hidden under a cloak of soft colourless feathers.

On her lips there was the slightest tinge of scarlet. It was like a stain of blood.

I was so close to her—as one sometimes is to a stranger at these momentary encounters—that I could detect the faint sweet atmosphere about her, and catch the contrast of languor and strength between her graceful ease of posture and the firm hand and wrist that held her parasol. She noticed my friend, to his unbounded pleasure, and looked questioningly out at me from beneath her crimson shadow: certainly she was a woman who could forget nothing: but could she outgrow things? And had she won herself new sympathies—a heart? In the one instant ere she passed by, that question was answered: a little child running in front of us was almost in the road beneath her prancing horses, ere it saw the danger. I made a motion forward to stop its progress; but her quick sight had been more keen than mine.

'*Tenez*!' she called to the coachman in her clear pure voice—I had heard it before outside the little Norwood villa—and in the midst of her recognition of my friend she had leaned out to-

wards me, stooping forwards from her cloak, and crushing the great cluster of Maréchal Niel roses which she wore on her left shoulder, as she said to the Count in French, with tears making her beautiful eyes larger, and in soft tones of the most exquisite pity, 'The poor little one! Ah! how terrible if one had hurt it!'

It was like a flame, a vivid moment of speech and glance and gesture, which let one catch a glimpse of the tenderest human soul; before I could realise it, or even answer her look, her horses had carried her onward into the Park.

Was this the woman that had drunk up a man's young life like the cup of cold water which may carry a blessing, but is not worth a word of thanks?

'Is she not divine?' said my enthusiastic friend.

I repressed my own approval: I could say neither 'Yes' nor 'No,' and I left him to hover about and wait for another of her glances in the drive, while I passed on down the broad glaring street to my hotel.

I did not see her again till the following Saturday; she may have passed me a hundred times, and

I should not have looked at her, so strongly did my disinclination return, when I had once taken my eyes off her. I set to work and called her hard names, feeling all the while, against my will, her sweet persuasive charm. But I heard of her—heard indeed from young and old of nothing else than *her* beauty—*her* genius—*her* horses—intrinsic and accidental qualities all jumbled up in most indiscriminate praise, as stupid England jumbles them at any fresh surprise. But for my part I had warning enough not to wish to play young Merlin to her Vivian, as my poor schoolmate had done, and become 'lost to life and use, and name and fame.'

Though for all that I went with my friend to her party!

It was not given at Claridge's, where for some weeks she had inhabited one of the long comfortless rooms for which our aristocracy prefers to pay double prices, for tradition's sake—but which I could guess that her taste had transformed, when I heard of her daily extravagance in flowers and trivial things, and recalled from the pages of Clifford's journal the sudden grace with which she grouped them.

It was given at a big Piccadilly mansion in process of decoration for the Count, where he meant to take up his residence during the following year. The entrance-hall and staircase were the only parts of the house yet furnished, except the chief reception-rooms, and their comparative emptiness was the opportunity of the great number of guests invited, among whom my inquisitive friend and I arrived later than he had wished. I was in no hurry, and I had the bad taste, or the want of courage, to keep him waiting at my hotel, in the formally furnished sitting-room *au quatrième* that was mine, and had the look of a scene in a five act French play.

He was fuming heartily when at last I joined him. 'Come on, Frank,' he said, with an attempt at cheeriness which only succeeded in being impatient, and we made our way, in the first May sunshine, to the centre of London interest that day.

The string of carriages was enormous, and showed amid the ordinary traffic of the streets like the flowers at Covent Garden among the refuse greenery. I felt that we were two elect of the procession going up to worship—what? an idol of mud.

I kept the thought of Clifford's grave before me as we went. I longed for a moment in which to say to this woman, 'There was one thread of your golden hair that went from his hand to his lips; I nailed it down in his coffin; it was all you gave him when you robbed him of the world and time, when you took his genius for your plaything and his soul for your refreshment. I took care that he should not lose it; he will claim you by it when you meet him.' I longed to say all that and more, but one only thinks those things in the gangway of modern life; one does not say them; and we made our way decorously to worship the idol in silence.

If for mere friendship's sake I longed to speak to her so harshly, I thought, how must she have blamed herself who had awakened to a human heart, when he from whom she had stolen it was beyond her thanks and comfort!

We arrived at the big house, we ran up the crimson-carpeted stairs between the rows of plants that kept off the mob—and beyond which they looked like an earthy border—we were only two more black-coated, white-flowered men among the throng, and never to be anything more to her,

like or loathe her as we might—units for patronage and just the fraction of a smile.

We were announced at last, after pushing through a hot-house throng of whatever the world most esteems, which was swarming up the marble stairways, and chatting along the gilt-ceiled passages hung with a few costly and beautiful paintings.

There is nothing small or Bohemian about the Count's house; it is in the grand style.

And at last, through lobby and antechamber, we reached the room where she was.

The Count received us with his easy hospitality. I knew him at once, and felt him like an old acquaintance—hate him, mistrust him, dread him though I did.

Véra herself would have, I thought, at first, no word for us; she was speaking to a small distinguished-looking group in the distance, who were admiring one of her pictures hung to catch the strong afternoon light that poured full upon her head as she stood before it. Her beauty held the people like a spell.

I have no other word for her than that she seemed like Clifford's soul; she was so brilliant, so tender, so noble.

She was drawing herself a little backwards as she looked at the picture; her head was golden in the sun, her lovely face was like a flower in the morning. She was drest in a robe of some rare brocade, a dull greyish ground enwrought with dark green ivy leaves; it was made quite plain and straight, but open at the neck, and amongst some enamelled ivy leaves which fastened it were a few real ones at the throat, amid which I saw the glimmer of a turquoise fastening. The costume was sombre and heavy, the laces that relieved it were fine and old. She wore no jewels upon head or neck, neither earrings nor necklace; but her left arm was laden with bangles, and attached to them was the dazzling creature of crystal and diamond that was her symbol in my fancy. The right arm was quite bare, and it had the beauty and the strength that I knew—beauty to attract and to despoil, strength to grasp and to point onward.

At last she turned towards us and recognised my friend, but she did not look at him; she looked at me, as if with an effort to remember. 'You must introduce him to me,' she said to him with simple grace.

And as I touched the fair right hand which she extended, I felt in a moment that I forgave her. 'It is not she,' I said within myself; 'it is another: this woman can never have stooped to deceit or sin.' I felt also that she was a woman who could suffer; that she must have suffered, indeed; that I could never have the heart to speak of my poor friend to her; that he had not truly known her. And I felt all this by magic before I had framed a word. I was introduced, and said what I best could about the honour of it, to which she did not trouble to listen at all. I evidently was only another of 'those people who were nothing to her,' though she wished to treat me with consideration and kindness—to *enroll* me, as it were.

I retired a few steps as fresh arrivals joined the group, and looked at some of the canvases upon the wall, and at the exquisite decoration of the vast room, scented with tropical flowers. I suppose I was as mute as they, for some ladies near me did not seem to take even my sense of hearing into consideration.

'She takes no notice of us at all,' said one who was thin and rather delicate looking, to her mother, who answered in a deeper tone:

'My dear, she has the world at her feet; one must respect success.'

'She has quite forgotten that poor fellow,' said the third, who was younger and less sentimental perhaps, or at least more outspoken than her sister.

'It was all nonsense,' returned the mother, whose *métier* was doubtless to sanction the star's courses; 'I said so all along.'

'He was very nice though,' said the thin daughter, looking for the moment a little paler and less acrid while her eyes filled with tears.

'What folly you talk, Lavinia!' returned the mother.

Lavinia?

I looked at them again with interest; they were Mrs. Chesterton and her daughters: I felt that I knew them also: indeed, I had a moment's doubt as to whether I ought not to introduce myself; but at that moment a tall dark man, who was assisting in doing the honours of Véra's *salon*, came up to them and made them mildly welcome. It was in obedience to a sign from Véra herself, who accorded them the merest nod; but even that token of familiarity intoxicated them to such an

extent, that they began to talk in random French about the '*chère Comtesse Véra*,' as people will sometimes who are surprised by a moment of foreign courtesy.

I looked away from them to the sinister face of Lord Charles Carlton, for in an instant it flashed across me that it was none other than he. I perused that handsome face, the thin closed lips, the crafty eyes, the loose full nostril, the square chin, and I remembered what my friend had told me about his probable engagement to Véra. Yes: he would keep her secret, but I felt that Nemesis was awaiting her at last, if it was to be her fate to marry Lord Charles Carlton: I recognised the justice of such a fate with a sense of relief, though when I glanced back at her I could not repress my pity. All that had been artificial in her, in poor Clifford's day, had given place to a glowing youth and health, which made her the incarnation of loveliness and delight; those fair eyes and those sweet lips acknowledged no secret: she had come unscathed out of the past—she had forgotten.

She was speaking swiftly about her art—how it had been the dream of her childhood; and about

success of her picture—how it was the crown her season. Was it possible that she was going speak of Clifford Gray?

A moment ago I had heard her referring with friend to the little child's narrow escape ore her horses, on the former evening, and the rs of sympathy had welled into her eyes, as y might have done into poor Clifford's. If she ld feel that sorrow for the possible catastrophe a stranger, what must be her sorrow for him, d the irrevocable doom that had fallen upon him, her sake, and because he had loved her too ll!

Presently, after a few words with other of my quaintance, she made a step backward, and with charming glance of possession singled out a tall ung fellow from her group. He had a fine eet-tempered face, he had the cordial gesture at invites an answering smile; he was the sort man to whom one could wish no ill.

I heard a whisper of surprise behind me nong the Chestertons: it was not Lord Charles at she was going to marry.

She passed me on the young man's arm, as ey were crossing the room: I could not but

observe their bearing, and it may have been my look that stopped her; but I think it was something else.

'Ah!' she said gently, and with her old air of vainly trying to remember something; 'you must let me introduce you to Prinz Ernst. *Mon ami*,' she added, turning her clear eyes full of love to his, as she named me to him, 'you will like to make his acquaintance: he was a friend of my old master and,' with a radiant smile, 'I think I may say admirer—Mr. Clifford Gray.'

I walked one day in spring by the side of a rushing river; I tracked it past town and factory, past millwheel, bridge and lock, till it became a yellow sluggish stream for common use, among the fields. There was a little lake quite near it, but alone, fed by a silver mountain torrent, and reflecting back the sky. When I passed there again in summer, the torrent of snow-water and pure rain was dried up, the little lake had burst its bounds, and poured its whole bright flood into the river. The river ran on through the valleys, singing. How should it sorrow for the parched bed of the little lake, now that it was full of the water-

course instead? What did it matter that the ripple was still and the reeds dead, that the forget-me-nots had ceased to bloom, while the river had its lilies and its song!

The river could not stay: it ran singing on among its widening pastures, glad and buoyant to the sea.

THE END.

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